No. 650 JUNE 12, 1909 5 CENTS

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE HOLLINGSWORTH PUZZLE

Just at this crucial moment, Nick Carter drew the two sides of the screen about him.

STREET & SMITH, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.

Inside Front Cover

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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 *Seventh Ave., N. Y. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year* 1909, *in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C.*

No. 650. NEW YORK, June 12, 1909. Price Five Cents.

The Hollingsworth Puzzle;

OR,

NICK CARTER THREE TIMES BAFFLED.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A BAY-WINDOW MYSTERY.

"I think, sir, it would be best to come downstairs; the gentleman has been taken suddenly ill. I had him sit on the hall lounge for a second, sir. It looks like a fainting spell, and he can't come up, just now."

When Joseph, Nick Carter's phlegmatic servant, made a statement, it was not accompanied by any oratorical display. Joseph refused to be really ruffled by anything. That was his nature.

The detective had expected a very important visitor and Joseph, scarcely five minutes before, had hurried down to show this party up, in response to a long, nervous ring at the bell.

His return was accompanied by the calm yet astonishing statement quoted above.

"Are you sure it is Hollingsworth?" Nick Carter asked, with much eagerness in his voice?

"I am, sir."

"Did he look all right when he came in?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't make this out, Joseph. Still, now that I recall it, I should appreciate the circumstances. Hollingsworth has never been himself since the death of his daughter. Poor girl, that was a brutal murder. Return to the hall, Joseph; I will be down immediately."

The detective lost no time in descending the stairs of his comfortable Madison Avenue home. His offices were above, the lower portion of his residence not materially different from any other snug home in that locality. Joseph had spoken advisedly. Stretched out at full length upon a lounge, Nick saw Mr. Hollingsworth. He was a tall, rather handsome man, past middle age, with just a dash of gray at the temples. His face, however, told only too well the terrible suffering through which the man had passed. It was drawn and white and poor of color.

A business trip, some time before, had brought him to New York, from his California home, where he was the master of many fine vineyards. An intriguing superintendent, one Vignaux, had plotted and counterplotted, at last coming to New York. Shortly afterward Hollingsworth's beautiful blind daughter, Estelle, was murdered in the conservatory of a Washington Square mansion, at which father and daughter were honored guests. Nick Carter had, after a baffling series of adventures, tracked down the murderer and landed him in jail. Following this temporary license to rest, Nick Carter had heard suddenly from the old California magnate. The man evidently wanted to see Carter upon a very important and pressing matter, since his message was to the effect that he would come at once and that Carter was to remain at home until then.

Now he had been stricken strangely in the hallway of the detective's own house.

"Is he insensible?" Carter inquired, pouring a drink of brandy into a glass from the decanter he had brought from his office.

"It looks so, sir," Joseph returned.

"Raise his head a trifle—that's it; I think this brandy will do him good. Now, Joseph, some ice-cold water."

"Yes, sir, immediately," and Joseph hurried noiselessly to the rear of the hall.

The brandy worked a charm, Carter was pleased to note, for Hollingsworth's eyes opened and he looked up with dull, faded eyes from the lounge, straight into Nick Carter's face.

"It overcame me," he whispered hoarsely.

"Just an attack of dizziness, I presume, Mr. Hollingsworth?"

"I felt myself going, I reeled, and then the servant must have caught me. I fear, Mr. Carter, that I will not survive many of these attacks. They are becoming alarmingly frequent."

"To what do you ascribe them?"

"Ah, that is something I cannot explain."

"Have you consulted a specialist?"

"I have talked the matter over with my family physician. In a tentative way, he says that I worry too much, that I am becoming a nervous wreck, and that it is my own fault."

"Do you know, I think there is much truth in what he states, Mr. Hollingsworth," Carter said with emphasis; "you are worrying too much."

"How can I help it, Carter?"

"Will power."

"There is precious little left; now another series of calamities has befallen me, as if I had not suffered enough already."

"This is surprising news."

"I wish to talk it over with you; that is the object of my visit."

"Permit me to assist you; it is more comfortable up in my private office. Joseph will bring some cold water and you can hold a handkerchief to your temples."

Everything possible was done to make Hollingsworth comfortable, and presently he actually brightened up, to the point where connected conversation became possible.

"I am most eager to hear your story, sir," Nick Carter urged. "I trust it is nothing serious."

"On the contrary, it is very, very serious."

"A crime of some character?"

"Yes, a baffling one."

"Please go into detail, Mr. Hollingsworth."

"I have been robbed, mysteriously robbed. Gems of almost priceless value have been taken, as if by a spirit hand, with never a trace or a clue."

"When did this occur?"

"I made the discovery shortly after seven this morning?"

"And where are you stopping?"

"Just off Gramercy Park; I have rented a two-story house in that section. The lease covers the period of a year and I have occupied it two months to the day."

"Do you live alone in this house, sir?"

"Practically. Since the death of Estelle, I have desired to be more and more alone. I could not think of social engagements or the things I once enjoyed. You know, of course, that I sold out my California interests and have gone into the banking business here?"

"I did not know it. This is indeed a surprise."

"I could not think of returning to the old coast home. My daughter had presided over it so graciously, and my love was so steadfastly linked with those sunny hours, that I resolved to forever leave the old environments."

"But the big house must be lonely for you?"

"I do not find it so. I have much to occupy my attention. My new business enterprises have kept my nose to my desk night and day. I am trying to forget, Mr. Carter; I am trying to forget."

"I can now better understand the warnings of your physician. You have made an unnecesary recluse of yourself, and it is playing havoc with your health."

"Please permit me to continue with my story. One of my banking clients, a woman, who is now abroad, left with me some very valuable family jewels. I think the total worth of them must approximate nearly eighty thousand dollars. There were rings and bracelets, a few pins and smaller articles, but the most valuable of these was a string of twelve wonderful diamonds. The string made up a necklace that it required London and Paris diamond brokers six years to match. Each stone is perfect."

"And this necklace was left with you?"

"It was. I have known the lady a long time, and when she sailed for Paris the collection was placed in my charge. That was only yesterday. I even went to the boat with her. She feared that she might be robbed on the trip over, or while abroad, and had resolved not to take the stones with her. They were to have been placed in a safe-deposit box at the bank."

"Why should you have taken them home, if I may inquire?"

"I wanted to list them. I have a safe at the house and I did not anticipate any trouble, since no one knew, not a soul save myself, that they were under my roof."

"But of all the collection only the necklace was stolen, I believe I understand you to state?"

"Precisely; now, to continue. A little inside history relative to the necklace will interest and assist you, doubtless. My lady friend, whom we shall know as Madam X., purchased this necklace through a London diamond broker. Every gem is a product of the Old Mine and you know what the blue-whites of the Transvaal are. That mine has not been in operation for some ten or even more years. No more are found. It is an actual fact, Mr. Carter, that every genuine blue-white from the Old Mine is on record. There are only a stated number in existence."

"Yes, I am acquainted with the Old Mine gems," Nick Carter stated. "Were these gems of the old Amsterdam cut, or modern? That might make a great

difference in their value. If modern, then they would be priceless, I can understand that. The old way of cutting did not show the full measure of brilliancy. The new method brings out all that a perfect gem should possess, more refraction, less wastage."

"The cutting was modern, Mr. Carter. What you say is correct. From the history of these diamonds I should say that they were all deep enough to be symmetrically cut, and you understand how algebra figures in diamond-cutting. The ratio must have been absolutely correct."

"What was the total worth of the string?"

"Something like forty or fifty thousand dollars. There was a slender gold cord to which the stones were attached. At the back, I should say there might have been three inches of this plain gold; the remainder of the circlet was dotted with the beautiful stones."

"Were they of uniform size?"

"No, the central stone was perhaps three carats. The others ranged down, to either side to nothing smaller than one and three-fourth carats."

"At what time did you leave your bank, Mr. Hollingsworth, on Thursday?"

"It was very late, nine o'clock."

"You brought the jewels with you?"

"Yes, they were in a plush case. I had not even seen them until I reached home."

"Had you mentioned the fact that they were in your possession up to the time of leaving?"

"Not a single word. I came from the steamship pier direct in a cab. Madam X. handed me the case in her stateroom, ten minutes before the sailing hour."

"It was covered, of course?"

"Naturally, yes, but in a piece of ordinary brown paper."

"And when you reached the bank, what did you do with the case?"

"I kept it steadily in front of me on my flat-topped desk in my own private office. I did not leave that office once. I never stirred from the table. I had many business affairs to attend to, and a bite of lunch was brought in somewhere around six o'clock."

"You did not lose sight of the case during those hours?"

"I did not, most emphatically."

"Did any one know of your visit to the dock?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"You kept the whole matter secret?"

"Yes, I did."

Nick Carter, chin in hand, was deep in reflection for a moment or so, during which Hollingsworth was equally silent and thoughtful. Finally the detective looked up.

"Some one must have known of the jewels. It leaked out in some manner. But the details of the robbery. I am very curious to know exactly how it was accomplished."

"I reached my home in the neighborhood of half after nine. The trip was made in a taxicab. I went at once to my second-story private room, my safe-deposit vault, as I term it."

"The statement is rather involved, Mr. Hollingsworth. Have you fitted up a second banking establishment in Gramercy Park?"

The man smiled rather sadly.

"No, you could scarcely call it that. Permit me to explain. I sometimes keep certain valuable papers, bonds, etc., at the house, my personal matters. Off from the upper room, fitted up as a working den, there is a parlor. It has not been used while I have been an occupant of the house, since it is quite dark; the sunlight, in fact, never reaches it. There is a spacious bay window fronting to the south. At one time it looked out upon an open garden and flower beds. That must have been many years ago. From the parlor, this little circular room with its side seats juts; it is perhaps eighteen feet, or less, in circumference. When a blank wall was built almost flush with the masonry outside, naturally enough the usefulness of those windows ceased. All light was shut out. That is what our commercial world is doing for New York. When I moved into the old mansion, I selected the bay window circle as my 'vault' if I may term it that. Knowing that it was inaccessible from without I had a solid door built between the circular room and the parlor. It was fitted with a big, old-fashioned lock. In the bay window space I had my ledgers, cabinets, and a safe, a small one."

"I understand, sir."

"At ten that night, after another cup of tea, I placed the jewel case in the safe, and fixed the combination. Then I locked the big door and retired for the night."

"Do you sleep on the same floor?"

"Last night I slept in my office, adjoining the parlor. I was too tired to go to my room. I have a lounge for the purpose."

"But you did not open the case that night?"

"I did not; I was worn out."

"It might have been empty at the time."

Hollingsworth smiled again, very grimly.

"Your suspicions are not well founded, Mr. Carter. I am coming to that. My dear, sir, I *did* open the case the next morning. Nothing was missing."

"Oh."

"As I have told you before, I was up very early, at six-thirty, in fact. I had been very restless and was unable to sleep. I took a shower bath, had breakfast and then went to the 'vault,' if you will permit me to term it that in our conversation."

"But you did not leave the office, the parlor?"

"Not for an instant—my breakfast was brought up to me."

"Proceed."

"My very first thought was of the jewel case. I opened the safe, placed the trays on top of it, looked them over very carefully for a few minutes when my desk phone rang, back in the office. I thought for

a moment, locked the bay window door and went to my office, answering the phone."

"But the jewels were on the top of the safe—out of the case?"

"Yes, they were. I had no reason to even lock the door. It was simply a whim. A Mr. Wimpley, who works at the bank, was on the wire. He told of another calamity there. I was all unstrung, as you can imagine. I may have been at the phone talking with him for five minutes; then I returned to the bay window room, unlocked the door, and went in."

"And you found——" Nick Carter asked, tense feeling in his voice, for he suspected a climax.

Hollingsworth sank back upon the couch, his hands over his eyes, rocking from side to side as he made response.

"Carter," he said, chokingly, "the diamond necklace had been taken. It was gone!"

CHAPTER II.

LOOKING OVER THE GROUND.

It was some moments before Hollingsworth could thoroughly collect himself. Whether from what he had experienced or a secret terror known only to himself, the fact remained that he was overcome by his own recitation, and that he did not relish the idea of its rehearsal. Nick Carter did not press him, for there was no occasion to do so.

At last, the detective spoke. He found that the elderly banker was raising himself from his old position and could be approached in a rational manner.

"The only article missing was the necklace?" he inquired.

"That was absolutely all, Mr. Carter."

"Then you made an investigation?"

"I should say I did. You know, as I told you, I left the case and the jewels outspread upon the top of the safe. The moment I unlocked the door and entered the bay-window room, I realized that something was missing. I had left the string of diamonds on top; I had examined them last."

"No other gems were missing?"

"None."

"And you examined the contents of the case carefully?"

"I have."

"Does it not strike you as very peculiar that a thief should select to take the necklace only, when, with a trifling additional effort, he could have gotten away with all of the jewels?"

"I had thought of that, yes."

"But, how do you account for it?"

"I could not cope with the mystery myself. It puzzled and astounded me. As a rule, I can manage my own affairs. This robbery has beaten down every barrier; it has made me as helpless as a child."

"To return to the small room for a moment; you say that the jewels, rings and other articles were undisturbed."

"No; I rather think that they had been pawed over."

"Why do you say that?"

"There were three plush or velvet cloths in the case, Mr. Carter. I pulled these out when I first opened that case. I spread them upon the top of the safe. Then I put the gems on them. The necklace was the last to be studied, and I made a study of all, I must admit."

"When you returned, what did you find?"

"I found the diamond necklace missing. Further than this, I found two of the velvet cloths crumpled, as if some one had hurriedly pulled them aside. Three rings were on the floor, one clear across the room, and the majority of the small bits apparently, had been pawed over."

"But, my dear Hollingsworth, from all points of reasoning, why should a criminal leave these things at all? Why should he run with a petty necklace when there were other valuables?"

"I have only one theory, sir."

"And what is that?"

"The thief heard me coming back."

"Ah, you interrupted him in his work?"

"Yes, and in his haste, the nearest, the topmost thing, was snatched at. It happened to be the necklace, and a pretty haul that made."

"Then, Mr. Hollingsworth, as far as you could judge, there was every indication of a hurried exit on the part of the guilty person?"

"That would be my impression."

"How many servants have you?"

"Three, only."

"What are their positions?"

"Randolph Hicks, a man of all work. He takes complete charge of the house. He is an elderly person, perhaps fifty years of age?"

"How did he happen to become a part of your household?-"

"I engaged him through a California friend of mine. He had been with one New York family for fifteen years. They left for the West and I took him."

"You do not mistrust Hicks?"

"Mr. Carter, of course I do not."

"But one may never tell. Hicks did not know that the jewel case was in the house?"

"No one knew that. I said as much when you first questioned me."

"But ears are ears and keyholes have eyes."

"There is no possible way to see into the bay-window room save by the parlor, and I did not leave the two rooms, the parlor and my office."

"Hicks did not enter at all during morning or evening?"

"He did not."

Suppose then, Mr. Hollingsworth, that we entirely eliminate Mr. Hicks. Now as to the other two servants. What of them?"

"They are simply menials."

"Both men?"

"No, Mr. Carter; a man and his wife, Dexter and the Mrs."

"Why did you find it necessary to have three servants?"

"That was a sort of privilege, you might term it a luxury. However that may be, I did not wish to be entirely alone. Hicks, of course, I knew of, the other two were comparative strangers."

"Yet you took them into your home?"

"I had to have servants. I believe it was Hicks himself who suggested the pair. The woman is a young sort of person, French, I believe, although her husband is English. She keeps things tidy and is, in a way, a housekeeper."

"Did Dexter or his wife enter the parlor or your office during the events mentioned?"

"I have tried to explain that no one did."

"You had no acquaintances stopping with you that night?"

"None, and never have had."

"You can think of no solution to this yourself. You can bring to mind no one person who might have realized the worth of the gems and their whereabouts?"

"I am sorry to say that I cannot."

And that was exactly where all information ceased. Nick Carter, very naturally, insisted upon going at once to the home of Mr. Hollingsworth and investigating the ground more thoroughly. After leaving word with Joseph that Patsy and Chick, his tried and true asistants, might expect to hear from him soon, Nick entered the same taxi with his client and they were whirled away.

On the way across several new points were brought forth. Carter had held them in check up to this time.

"You were called up by phone?" the detective inquired.

"Yes, I was interrupted while looking at the gems."

"You mentioned this man's name, a bank official, some one you knew?"

"Mr. Horace Wimpley, yes."

"He is connected with your bank?"

"He is a trusted employee."

"And you also stated, let us see, that you were faced by an additional calamity. May I inquire into that?"

"Simply means more work for you, Mr. Carter?'

"Nevertheless, please proceed."

"The bank has been cleverly defrauded out of over twenty thousand dollars, and it may mean more. I do not know how far the matter goes."

"Well, well, you are playing in rather peculiar luck."

"I should not call it luck."

"The nature of the swindle?"

"Is an absolutely new and original one. Let me read you something. It is an extract from a bulletin sent out by Pinkerton's National Detective Agency."

"Then they knew?"

"We received the bulletin just a day too late. It was opened by Mr. Wimpley during my absence."

"And the substance of that notice?"

"Let me give it to you as I read it, Mr. Carter." In a quick, nervous voice, Hollingsworth repeated, line for line, the contents of the twice-folded sheet. It was undoubtedly authentic and legitimate, as Nick Carter immediately recognized by looking over the shoulder of his client:

CIRCULAR REVEALING AMAZING SWINDLING SCHEME.

SPECIAL H BULLETIN, NO 46.

FORGERIES. CONFIDENTIAL.

Issued February 27, 1909, by order of Protective Committee of the American Bankers' Association.

Professional criminals recently defrauded several banks in New York city and near by cities and towns with skillfully forged and counterfeited checks, in the following manner:

One of the forgers, stating he intended to engage in the dry goods business, recently rented a vacant store, incidentally inducing the owner to recommend him to a bank, where he opened an account by depositing $1,000 in cash, withdrawing and depositing different amounts, gradually reducing the deposited amount to his credit, when he deposited a cleverly executed forged counterfeit check for $2,600.98 drawn upon a New York bank. The following day the depositor drew a check for $2,500 to a confederate, pretending he desired to use it to close a business deal, had the bank certify it, but subsequently returned, stating the proposition had fallen through and requested currency for the certified check, which was paid him. Meanwhile, the forged $2,600.98 check, not detected, was honored by the New York bank upon which it was drawn. To apprehend these swindlers we earnestly solicit the coöperation of all who read this circular.

Pinkerton's National Detective Agency,
No. 57 Broadway, New York.

Such was Hollingsworth's excited perusal of the folded bulletin.

"When did you receive this?" Nick Carter inquired?"

"Wimpley mailed it to me under special delivery the same night I left the bank. It came to him after I had left."

"But he did not call you up that night?"

"He did not discover that we, in turn, had been hoodwinked, in a like manner, until very early morning. He is one of the first at the bank, untiring, working beyond ordinary business hours."

"Then he had you on the wire."

"He did."

"And he told you that the worst had happened."

"He told me that he had been looking over things, and after some reflection he feared that we had been played. Then he spoke of the Pinkerton bulletin."

"You heard this from your private office wire?"

"I did."

"At what hour did you receive this letter from Wimpley?"

"It was handed to me after I had telephoned with Wimpley, after I had discovered the loss of the necklace. Dexter brought it up. I suppose it came by special delivery before the first mail of the morning."

"When you spoke with Wimpley, did he mention having sent you that letter?"

"Yes, he did."

"Didn't he expect you down the next morning?"

"He knew that I was irregular. There are many days when I am too ill to even go to the bank. This is especially true of late. I have instructed him to send all mail in this very fashion, no matter if I leave the bank as late as nine."

"Have you seen Mr. Wimpley since the phone conversation?"

"No, Mr. Carter. My first interest was the disappearance of the gems. I knew of you of course, for what you have accomplished before, and I naturally turned to you. I know your natural ability."

"We shall work in the present, only, Mr. Hollingsworth. You appear to have a puzzle that is complicated. We shall know more of it when we reach your home and I have an opportunity to look over the ground."

Matters were thus somewhat up in the air when Nick Carter reached the home of his client. He found it, like many other old-fashioned houses off Gramercy Park, dusty and a trifle shabby. The upward trend along Fifth Avenue had left it alone, as it were, neglected and almost forgotten, yet just such a place as Hollingsworth might well select, as being apart from the social bustle.

The ground plan of that upper floor was exactly as the millionaire Californian had described it.

The left wing was entirely taken up by the two large rooms. To the front was the office used by Hollingsworth, a most commodious and sunny room; then, immediately adjoining, the parlor, somewhat gloomy and heavy of fittings. From this ran the corner bay-window room. At first glance, the detective noted the massive door that had been built into the space where once only curtains had hung. The door was remarkable for the strength of wood that had been put into it. The whole arrangement was ponderous and suggestive of the past ages, with a great brass knob, an enormous lock and iron-bound tricks of the tinker's trade of a character to inspire awe. When Hollingsworth put in that door, it was very evident that he did not intend any one save himself to go beyond it.

Hollingsworth, in turn, was most accommodating. He was eager to do all in his power to assist the detective. After he had thrown open the door and the sleuth had entered, he retired to his private office. Exactly an hour from that second, Nick Carter came out. His brow was wrinkled and he wore a troubled look.

"What do you think of it, sir?" Hollingsworth inquired with much eagerness.

And Carter told only the truth.

"I seldon have been so mystified in my life, Mr. Hollingsworth," was his ready response. "I am for the moment baffled. You can count one against me, I guess."

CHAPTER III.

COLD-BLOODED MURDER.

Nick Carter was always of the opinion that the truth and the whole truth was a very sensible way to greater and bigger things. He was conducted immediately to Hollingsworth's private office, across the parlor, and here the detective sank into an easy-chair. His client sat opposite. There was an awkward pause for some seconds, during which Hollingsworth waited with becoming patience.

At last Nick Carter broke the silence.

"For once, sir," he said, "I am baffled."

"Do you mean that?"

"I do."

"And yet I hear so much of——"

The detective interrupted very promptly.

"You hear much of what we can do—of what we have done. At the same time, we *must* have something tangible to work upon. Mr. Hollingsworth, I have looked over every square inch of the ground and I find my brain in a whirl. I am just where I was when I first started in."

"But surely there must be something to——"

"Nothing.'

"Then you will not undertake the case?"

"On the contrary, it attracts me because of its baffling mystery. I would not drop it for the world."

"You have looked over the bay-window room?"

"Every inch of it, as I stated to you."

"And still——"

"No clue, sir. It is most puzzling, most unusual. Let me put it to you as I see it, in case I may have missed something of importance. We have the bay-window room as the centre of operations. You open a case of jewels, you leave the case on top of the safe from which it was taken. The gems are scattered about. You are called away suddenly by a phone message. You lock the door before you even answer that message. You hurry to your phone. From your private office, you can see through the parlor to the locked door. You talk, we will say ten minutes. All the while you know that no person has entered the parlor, which is still within your range of vision through the open office door. Then, after completing your call, you unlock the bay-window door. You go in. You find that a necklace has been stolen.

You also find that, while the plush covers and the rings and trinkets have been scattered about, nothing save the necklace has been taken. You believe that the guilty person has been interrupted during his work and has taken hurried flight. You make up your mind that some one has been in that room, and yet you know that it would be impossible for any one to enter without your knowing it, the door between this office and the parlor being at all times open."

"So far, Mr. Carter, you have read my thoughts and perfectly interpreted my explanations to you, sir."

"Good. Now let us go a bit further. I have gone over this ground, I have looked upon every phase of the affair, and I find that you have stated simply what has occurred. The more I examine matters the more confident I am that the crime is one of intricate and delicate machinery—brains, Mr. Hollingsworth, brains that have arranged a very pretty puzzle for all of us."

"And puzzles are your specialty, Mr. Carter."

"I have not denied that, sir."

"Did you fully examine the bay-window room?"

"I did."

"And still no solution occurs to you?"

"My first assumption was, naturally, that whoever took the necklace, escaped by the way of the windows."

"But they are boarded up and have been, all along."

"And so you find me baffled, for the first time."

"Did you look over those windows carefully?"

"Yes, there are three of them with large sashes. I should judge that the planks have been nailed across them for many months. There is rust around the nails even on the inside. At one point alone could I see beyond."

"Then you knew?"

"Then I knew, Mr. Hollingsworth, that no living mortal could possibly enter by way of the three windows. There is a loose plank and the sunlight glints through. I saw that a blank wall had been built up even with the old bay window, and that the space is so small that no man could climb between."

"You are satisfied that the thief did not enter by way of the three bay windows."

"I am positive."

"And yet I locked the other door and was never away from the office beyond the parlor."

"This I realize, sir."

"Therefore——"

"Therefore, Mr. Hollingsworth, for the present at least, until I may make further investigations, I am ready to admit defeat. I am baffled. They have me. How that robbery could have taken place is a mystery so deep that it may take some time to fathom."

"It is not very encouraging.'

"I am simply stating facts, sir."

"You have no solution?"

"None whatever just now."

Nick Carter was talking straight from the shoulder. He meant every word that he said, as discouraging and as humiliating as his confession was certain to be to the little giant himself. A most careful investigation of the environments had brought out these facts, which we shall reproduce, exactly as they were later written, in a neat hand, by the detective himself, upon one of his index cards:

"Hollingsworth bay-window room of small dimensions. Windows—three in number, carefully boarded and nailed. No chance of entrance by way of windows because of narrow walls and new masonry. Light entirely cut out. Only light from electric fixtures. To right, on entering, half of original window seat, plush covered, in green. Then wooden racks built against window on middle. Safe stands to right, about one yard from door. Small safe, flat topped, five feet or less from door and set squarely against the wall. On rollers. Other fixtures commonplace; chest, racks for ledgers and a small tin chest. Nothing extraordinary. Sounded walls and found same solid. Not woodwork, but plastered walls. No chance of trapdoors. Obviously impossible for any one to have entered bay-window room except by main door. This door is built firmly into the woodwork. Three inches thick. Lock of the most impressive character. Could not be forced, except by expert, and that would occupy possibly twenty minutes of time. Thief must have entered by that door, however, if at all. Parlor, old fashioned and gloomy. No light from sun. Closed on three sides. One door leading to main hall. Door found locked and statement made indicates that it has never been unlocked. Heavy cabinet directly beside bay-window door at right on entering. Empty. Office with no hall door. Have to enter by way of parlor. Nothing unusual discovered on floor or upon seats of inside room. Jewels just as Hollingsworth had left them. One amethyst half under window seat."

"From your desk, as you sit there now, Mr. Hollingsworth," Carter resumed, his brow puckered, "if you were leaning across to the phone, could you see the door of the bay-window room?"

Hollingsworth assumed that position.

"I can see a strip of it, the left-hand side."

"Do you remember looking up while you were at the phone?"

"I think I did, yes; several times. My mind was on the jewels; I was interested in examining them."

"But you saw no one?"

"No one entered the room after I locked the bay-window door, positively."

"How was your mail and your breakfast brought to you?"

"My mail is always left in a neat packet just outside the door, a part of the string surrounding it hanging from the knob. I have my breakfast brought in to me, of course."

"We must account for this strange robbery in some

way, you will concede, Mr. Hollingsworth," the detective persisted, glancing up at the old man as if he doubted his very sanity. "My heavens, man, material hands could only take that necklace. A spook is not our game. In spite of what you think, some one apparently entered the parlor by the hall door, and, slipping past while you were intent at the phone, managed to unlock the bay-window entrance."

"I tell you this has not been done; I would have seen or heard them. Have you noted the lock on the door, Mr. Carter?"

"I have; it is of ancient pattern and very large."

"No living man, expert or otherwise in the ways of locks, could open that door during the few minutes of my absence from the room. It would be absolutely impossible."

"There are many ways of opening locks."

"I insist that even if I had *not* seen the intruder I could have heard him."

"Where would your servants be apt to hang out at this hour?"

"The floor below."

"Please remain where you are, Mr. Hollingsworth. I wish to go downstairs very quietly and unheralded. They know I am in the house, but they might not expect me to be rambling around unchained. I will return in a few minutes."

"But you do not suspect them?"

"I certainly have no reason to, so far; at the same time I have my professional reasons for this move."

"I do not question your motives, Mr. Carter."

"One thing more."

"Yes."

"You have not disturbed the jewels on the safe nor any part of the three rooms to any great extent. Please still further refrain. I have by no means completed my investigation."

"As you say, Mr. Carter."

Carter found the lower floor as gloomy and as uninviting as he imagined it would be. Hollingsworth was not eager for light and cheerfulness. It went against the grain. The very house and its sombre fittings appeared to brood with the unfortunate father. There was the chill and dampness of the grave and much of its spectral, uncanny association. From the straight, broad hall, illuminated only by the little light that managed to creep in alongside the double front doors, four room doors opened. There was a parlor, smug and quaint but practically unused, a large dining room, complete in every detail, yet showing unmistakable signs of dust and neglect, a library, the empty shelves of which yawned uninvitingly in the dim light, and still another room next to it, absolutely empty, even the carpets having been taken up. The detective figured at once that while Hollingsworth might, on occasions, throw open the dining room and front parlor, he preferred the second floor of his old mansion and seldom, if ever, used the balance of the place.

His three servants, it was to be observed, also were not to be recommended for their activity. Dust lay everywhere and betrayed the marks of the sloven and the ingrate.

Nick Carter, up to this time, had simply glanced into the rooms, standing in each door for a second or so and with no attempt to conceal the fact that he was there. Far back, at the end of the hall, there was a little paneled entry, doubtless leading down to the basement and the servants' quarters. He tried the door; it was locked.

Retracing his steps, he suddenly became aware of the stealthy, guarded patter of feet—the peculiar sound as of some one moving swiftly in one of the rooms beyond. He stopped instantly, listening.

Now he could not hear it at all.

"Strange," the detective thought, tiptoeing down the hall. He had left all four doors open. One of them was half closed; the one opening upon the dining room. A mysterious hand had done that, unmistakably.

With no hesitation he pushed it inward, stepping into the room. A screen at the end moved, tilted, and fell back upon its bronzed legs, then silence came again.

"I was being watched, I'd bet a cool million on it," Nick Carter muttered to himself; "wonder whether it was our butler friend, Hicks, or one of the Dexters. This is growing intensely interesting and complicated."

He all but ran across the room to the screen, snatched at it, one hand on either bronze wing, and lifted it free of the floor. It was the act of a second, but he was not quick enough.

The space beyond the screen and next the wall was empty. Escape had been made by means of an oak door, hidden by the screen. This door was locked, too, and Carter found himself rubbing his chin in front of it, outwitted by the most simple of criminal methods.

"That door leads directly to the parlor," he calculated; "now to head them off. This is like a mystic maze chase. They know the ground better than I do."

A fact, heretofore unnoticed, inasmuch as he had not entered on his previous trip, checked him as he made for the door. The big dining-room table, with its central mahogany support, was dressed with silver and heavy plate. There were no dishes to suggest preparations for a meal, but the cloth was spread and it was too large for the table. On all four sides, it just about trailed the floor. On the side now approached by Nick Carter it was somewhat crumpled.

This would not have ruffled the detective's calm, however, had it been all. The tip of a woman's small shoe protruded from beneath the dazzling white spread. Carter lifted the cloth, intuitively feeling that he was destined to receive a shock. The body of a young woman was huddled at his feet and the woman was cold in death.

CHAPTER IV.

A LITTLE CHAT WITH WIMPLEY.

Walking hurriedly across to the hall door, Nick Carter drew it shut. Then he returned to the table. With much care and precision, he lifted the four drooping sides of the tablecloth, flapping them over upon the silver. The tragedy presented was one calculated to stir him from head to foot and to give the room a grewsome horror from which there was no escape.

He could not, at the moment, see the face of the woman, but he judged that she was young. The form was slight and graceful in contour, the garments of the very best texture. The little French-heeled boots were shiningly new, as if lately purchased.

Death had been caused by a blow across the back of the neck. A little blood was flowing, but to no great extent; yet, beneath the matted dark hair the skull was frightfully crushed. The weapon used must have been a heavy and deadly one.

The murderer had dragged the body to the table and thrust it under the low top, allowing the cloth to drop back in place, thus screening the grewsome spectacle. It had been the act of some one in great haste and desirous of concealing the victim in the shortest possible period of time. So impromptu had been the act that the body had fallen, face downward, and crushed upon the top of the dark, lustrous, curly hair was a little dark-green bonnet, upon which scarlet rosebuds gleamed pathetically. The gown was a walking costume and the woman had apparently just come from the street.

It was not until the detective carefully moved the victim that he saw the face and started back, amazed, perplexed, astounded.

"Just Heaven!" was his exclamation, "it is the daughter of Marie Felix, poor little Constantina! At last the end has been reached!"

The detective had very good cause to recognize the woman. In two rattling cases the girl had figured. Her mother was a typical French adventuress, with money, brains and a pedigree of crime. Nick Carter's first introduction to her had been when she ran a gambling den in the old French Quarter. Her place had been known as the "House of the Yellow Door," and when it was raided by Carter and his assistants, Marie and Constantina managed to escape, much to Carter's chagrin. Constantina had been marked in her dislike of the detective, once exposing him in a low hovel of the district, but when her sweetheart was murdered in their new home, some time later, and Marie deliberately called upon the detective to puzzle out the mystery, the daughter softened and there had been a certain recognized and agreed-upon friendship. All hostilities had been called off, chiefly because Nick had nothing tangible against the pair. They dropped out of his sight for the time being. Now Constantina had appeared, only to be the centre of a new circle of dark and baffling mystery.

In no wise could Carter reconcile the presence of the girl with her immediate environments. What had brought Constantina Felix, of all persons, to Hollingsworth's house, and who could have desired her death? True it was that Marie and the girl knew of Hollingsworth. Vignaux, at one time an employee of the millionaire, had been implicated in the death of Estelle, Hollingsworth's daughter. Furthermore, he had been a frequent caller at the House of the Yellow Door and knew the two Frenchwomen well. Vignaux, however, had been lodged in jail. On his Lodi case, Vignaux had been captured and placed in an automobile bound for Hackensack, the county seat. The sheriff had him scheduled for a cell, along with two other dangerous characters. At this point, Nick Carter's work on the case ceased. He did not even have another opportunity to talk with his French client, Marie Felix, or the daughter, both having disappeared.

Like a bolt frfom the blue, mystery upon mystery had fallen upon the house of Hollingsworth. The affair, from one grim criminal puzzle alone, had enlarged to a mosaic of tangling, marvelous intrigue. Where would it end?

Lest Hollingsworth grow impatient, Nick Carter returned. He found the old man, after a sleepless night, drowsing in his chair. As the detective used the phone, however, his client roused in a dazed way.

"Oh, is it you, Mr. Carter?"

"Yes, I'm telephoning over to the house. I want one of my assistants, Chick, to drop in. He will be here in my machine in a few minutes."

"What have you learned, anything new?"

"I have learned much, much more than I could have desired," was the calm rejoinder.

Still the little giant had no intention of telling Hollingsworth of the murder just yet. He made some plausible excuse about going below for another look-over, and was pleased to see the aged millionaire droop back in the desk chair, his head bowed and eyelids closed.

Chick was not long in reaching the house. Nick brought him in and together they went to the room of death. The body had not been disturbed in the least.

"How in the world did Constantina happen here?" was Chick's very first exclamation.

"Now you have me."

"That was a nasty blow on the head; guess it killed her instantly."

"Beyond the shadow of a doubt. Here, Chick, is a point, however, that annoys me exceedingly. That woman has been dead for hours—five at least, I know. Twenty minutes ago I heard some one slipping around in this room. I believe I was being watched, alone I cannot be sure of it. I darted for that screen across the room, but there was no one behind it. They had

escaped, neatly enough, by means of the big oak door, and then locked it behind them."

"Perhaps the murderer is still under this roof?"

"No, scarcely that, Chick."

"Why not?"

"Because a murderer is usually a coward at heart. He has a strapping, healthy fear of a dead body—the body of his victim. He might return to the scene of the murder, but never to a corpse."

"I guess you're right. But who is this assassin?"

"That is what I am trying to find out. That is why I sent for you. I may need Danny and Patsy before this complicated case is settled. Why, do you know, Chick, we are stacked against three individual propositions. First, the mysterious theft of a priceless diamond necklace; second, a big swindle game at Hollingsworth's bank; and now, third, this ghastly murder."

"Have our hands full, eh, Nick?"

"Exceptionally so."

"Hollingsworth here?"

"Yes, up in his office asleep. He did not get any rest last night for worry."

"Servants?"

"Three, a man and his wife and a chief butler with papers of high recommendation."

"Seen them yet—talked with them?"

"No, I have not. I want you to round up the trio as soon as we finish here and bring them up to Hollingsworth's office on the upper floor."

"I can do it all right, Nick. What is doing here, anyway?"

"I have looked in a rough sort of fashion only, Chick, but there are obvious notations to be made; for instance, Constantina Felix had a mission to perform, a reason to bring her here. She put on her very neatest suit, new shoes and the little green hat with the red roses. She was well shod and at her best when she reached the house."

"Then you do not think that she was murdered outside and brought in? That was my first impression when I looked her over."

"No, that is not the case, Chick. She was struck in this very house, and in this very room. I will show you the weapon presently, yet the case is more baffling than ever, now that I pick up an occasional clue."

"When do you think she could have reached the house?"

"Somewhere around ten this morning."

"How can you state that?"

"She wears a little watch. I found it, broken from its gold pendant, beneath her body. It had rolled from her shirt-waist when the body was unceremoniously dumped under the table. The crystal was smashed and the works had been damaged. The hands pointed to eight minutes after ten."

"Good enough."

"I believe that, a few moments before she was killed, the girl was in mortal fear. Her face is strangely distorted; I can read horror in every line. She knew what she might expect. Look across here at the oak sideboard; the assassin dragged her, still alive, to that spot, where he snatched up this"—and Nick Carter raised from the left-hand corner a massive cut-glass water bottle. It had a tapering neck that might well afford an excellent hand grip. The body of the bottle was oval in shape, of very, very thick glass and of a pattern that suggested the highest possible grade of engraver's art. The bottle alone must have cost something like one hundred dollars.

Chick Carter picked up the bottle and looked it over with keen eyes. His long training with his chief had made him thoroughly conversant with many of the tricks of the trade, but he shook his head in a perplexed way.

"I can't see anything," he declared. "Would your man have put the bottle carefully back in place on the sideboard, anyway?"

"I think he would, yes."

"Why?"

"He wanted to cover up as many tracks as he could."

"But he knew that he could not hide the body, further than to jam it beneath the table. There must be something wrong with your deductions, Nick."

"I do not think so. If you will look through this glass, you will see that some of the oil from a hand is still about the neck of the bottle. Where the remainder of the glass is smooth and clear, certain portions of the neck are dim—the grease does it, the natural moisture from a hand."

"I can see that now, but——"

"I know what you would say, Chick. You want to tell me that one of the servants left that imprint on the bottle because of very natural service. I know better. This dining room has not been used in a week or more. There is dust over everything; even on the knives and forks, still upon the table."

"That is true, all right."

"Furthermore, Chick, I should judge that the woman knew her destination, and found the front door was unlocked. She was confused upon entering, and there being no one to guide her, she opened the first hall door. It happened to be the door to the dining room. The attack was made after she entered."

"But why should the attack be made at all, unless one of the servants was mixed up in it?"

"I cannot answer that question just yet."

"Then the murder is still a mystery to you?"

"Completely."

"Have you notified the coroner?"

"No, I shall do that as soon as I can break it to Mr. Hollingsworth. I will telephone from Hollingsworth's private office upstairs."

"Shall I look up those servants now?"

"I wish you would. Do not frighten them; just say that they are wanted by Hollingsworth."

"Very well, Nick."

The door of the dining room was securely locked,

Carter taking the key. He found Hollingsworth still sleeping, as quietly as a child. It required a great deal of diplomatic care to tell him of the tragedy without bringing on another attack of "nerves."

Hollingsworth, however, displayed an unexpected amount of self-possession, principally because he placed no connection between the murder of Constantina Felix and his personal affairs. He stated briefly and vehemently that he had received no communication from the girl, that he had never really seen her to know her, and that if some plot was beneath the surface he could not imagine its character. He reverted constantly to the stolen necklace and the bank swindle, however, and Nick could not draw much from him on the score of the assassination. It was his private opinion that the girl, fleeing from an enemy, had chased into the house, finding the front door open.

They were still talking when a knock sounded at the parlor door. It was not customarily opened, but Hollingsworth did answer the summons. A young man was admitted, a young man of thirty, with sandy, straight hair, reddish mustache, cropped very short, a weak chin and shifty eyes. He had no earmark of mental or physical maturity.

"Come right in," Hollingsworth was heard to say, his voice bristling with welcome, and when they had entered the office, where Nick Carter was seated, he added: "I want you to meet Mr. Wimpley, Carter. He is the bank expert I referred to. He it was who first discovered the swindle that had been perpetrated. Take a seat, Wimpley."

The young man said nothing just then, but dropped, like a rag, into a chair, eying the detective with much subtle curiosity and surprise.

"Anything new, Wimpley?" Hollingsworth inquired.

"Yes, sir, I think so," the clerk responded.

"What is it?"

"I think I could find the man—*the* man," Wimpley returned with both eyes cocked suspiciously in Carter's direction.

Hollingsworth sprang from his chair.

"Actually, is this true?"

"Yes, sir!"

"When did you see him, and where?"

"About an hour ago, sir, I was compelled to call on Randolph & Haversham about those notes, sir. I took a cab and was passing through East Twenty-second Street when I happened to look out of the cab window. I saw a man, all fussed out in a big ulster. The day was warm and I couldn't quite figure it out; he looked so unusual. As we rolled ahead of him, I had a glance at his face. It was Mr. Plurey."

"The rascal."

"Yes, sir, then I gave directions to the driver to slow up, just to drag along. I peeked through the little glass window at the rear of the cab and saw him run up the steps of a four-story structure. It looked like an old office building, but there is a theatrical agency of some kind on the first floor, because I read the sign—a vaudeville bureau of the cheaper sort."

"Why didn't you follow, call a policeman and have him arrested on the spot?"

"I couldn't exactly do that, sir. He was gone before I could have the cab swung around; besides, there are a dozen or more different offices in that building. Somebody who knows more about it should attend to the matter."

"I wish you would sometimes work on your own responsibility, your own initiative, Wimpley," Hollingsworth complained.

"I think that fellow is the prince of liars," was Nick Carter's private and personal reflection.

CHAPTER V.

RATHER DISCOMFORTING NEWS.

The detective took young Mr. Wimpley in charge, as soon as Mr. Hollingsworth was through with him. That Nick Carter did not like the watery eyes and shifty expression of the young bank clerk was a foregone conclusion from the start. A good judge of character always, he had Wimpley's measurements almost instantly, and failed to understand how he could be placed in any position of actual responsibility. Every line of the young chap's face suggested the weak and wavering. He lacked determination, will power and no doubt brains.

"Mr. Wimpley," the sleuth began, "I wish you would give me some information concerning this Mr. Plurey, whom, I understand, has defrauded the bank out of a neat sum. That his plan was a new and shrewd one, I understand from Mr. Hollingsworth. How did he go about this? When did you first see him?"

Wimpley did not show any hesitancy. In fact, if anything, he was gushingly willing on every count.

"About three weeks ago, Mr. Carter," he declared, turning those weak eyes full upon the detective, "I was in the private office of the bank when the cashier brought in Mr. Plurey. He is a stoutish sort of person, smooth-faced, and looks like a Frenchman, although he used perfect English. He said that he was starting a double-deck dry goods store three blocks from us on one of the side streets and that, being a stranger, he had asked the party from whom he was renting the store to give him the name of a good banking institution, as he wished to open an account. He had a letter from Rockwell & Hardin, real estate brokers, and of course we knew the firm. I referred him at once to Mr. Hollingsworth and everything was satisfactory."

"Oh, he saw Mr. Hollingsworth then, at that time, did he?"

"Only for a short while. Mr. Hollingsworth passed the word to us. Mr. Plurey made a cash deposit of some two or three thousand dollars. We did not see

him again for quite some time—a week, I should say. All this time, however, he was gradually decreasing the sum on deposit. Small checks, ranging from one hundred to three hundred, came in and were honored. It was all accomplished in a perfectly legitimate fashion."

"You did not suspect anything crooked?"

"Naturally enough, Mr. Carter, we did not. Of late years the chance of forgeries in the banking business are very, very small. We have our own private corps of detectives. It is not as it was twenty years ago. About all of the famous old pen chaps are sent up. The system of special inks and papers makes it next to impossible to make out bad paper or doctor checks. Mr. Plurey's game was absolutely new."

"Then the matter progressed precisely as stated in the warning bulletin from the Pinkerton's?"

"If you read that you have it in a nutshell. The scoundrel got away with a cool bunch and we haven't seen him since last Saturday. The truth came out early this morning—very early, in fact."

"And you think you saw your man a while ago?"

"I am positive."

"Could you take me to that house?"

"Certainly, sir."

This concluded the detective's questioning. He was still suspicious of the suave, sandy-headed young bank assistant, but was entirely unable to place him in the maze of present mystery.

Wimpley was excused but asked to wait below. In the meanwhile, Chick had rounded up his three servants, and there was a certain element of real humor in their arrival upon the scene. The door was opened and two men and a woman were ushered in. Two were frightened, one even indignant of manner. The aggressive person appeared to be the butler, Randolph Hicks. He was very red of face, smooth shaven, sleek and pompous. He had on his street coat and a steamer cap was pulled over one eye, rakishly, as if he had meant to leave the house.

Dexter and his wife were put through the ordeal first. They were wide-eyed and nervous, but extremely simple of manner. Nick Carter dismissed them in a few minutes. For two days they had been working in the lower part of the house, "cleaning" as they put it. The cleaning was being done in the basement, and they were above very little. Mrs. Dexter was cooking all meals, but this was also done in the basement. Mr. Hollingsworth called infrequently for a bite. His club and the near-by restaurants provided for his wants to a great extent. In every way, the two vindicated themselves and proved alibis.

The interview ended with the following cross-examination of Mrs. Dexter:

"Where was your husband, this morning, between the hours of five and eight?"

"He was in bed, sir," the woman answered, growing red.

"In bed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it his habit to rise at eight?"

"No, sir, he is usually up at five."

"What happened this morning?"

"Him was out, sir, all night and him came in purty bad from too much beer. I put him in bed and that was how, sir."

"Oh, he was sleeping off intoxication, then?"

"Now, sir," Dexter intervened, "it wasn't so awful bad. I did have some beer and was sleepy and held the bed longer than I should, but I wasn't what you would call drunk, no, sir."

"Were you upstairs between the hours I have mentioned?" Carter continued, motioning to the wife.

"No, sir."

"Sure of that?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do."

The two servants were permitted to go. The fat, red-faced butler was next put on the rack. He took it seriously and was none too affable. Nick Carter ignored the manner and natural aggressiveness of the fellow. He pulled his chair up in front of the one occupied by Hicks, looking at him with piercing eyes.

"Your name is Randolph Hicks?"

"It is, yes."

"And you entered this household highly recommended?"

"I have my papers."

"You know, of course, that a robbery has taken place, and other things happened? You are usually on the first floor, are you not, to answer all door calls?"

"Yes, that is a portion of my duty."

"Were you upstairs this morning between five, we will say, and nine?"

"I was."

"What did you do?"

"I put Mr. Hollingsworth's mail at his door. Later I brought him up a tray of breakfast."

"Did you enter the rooms—either the parlor or the office?"

"I did not."

"Did you see any one above stairs at the time mentioned?"

"I did not."

"Could you swear that no one came up the stairs between five and nine?"

"I can't see how they could. We had no visitors. I did not open the door so far as I know—the street door, I mean."

"Is it possible that the door was left open by accident some time during the morning?"

"I do not think it was, sir."

"How do you account for the robbery?"

"I have no opinion to express. I can't see how it could have been accomplished."

"Where were you around about ten o'clock this morning?"

"Downstairs."

"In the basement?"

"No," with a shrug of the shoulders. "I have a little cubbyhole and a dash under the stairs. It is behind the stairs."

"No one entered the street door to your knowledge?"

"No one."

"The reason I say this is because a woman entered this house around that hour. She is now lying dead in the dining room. She was murdered. I am wondering how all that could transpire—the blow and the fall of a body, without your knowing it."

The butler appeared to be very much surprised, even startled. His face grew pale.

"This is the first I've heard of it, sir," he declared, a bit more politely.

"Now, Hicks, not more than an hour ago, less than that, I happened to be on the lower floor; I walked all around. Where were you then? I did not see you in your cubbyhole, as you term it?"

"I was out in front."

"Do you mean on the street?"

"Yes, sir."

"Talking with any one?"

"No, sir, just getting the air. I bought a paper, smoked a pipe of tobacco and came back."

"You did not see Dexter or his wife on that floor?"

"No, sir."

"Could there have been any one else in the house?"

"Not unless they just happened."

The detective, Chick and Hollingsworth were all looking at Hicks with scrutinizing eyes, yet there was no indication of nervousness. He told his story quickly and well. His manner was that of the self-possessed, phlegmatic Englishman.

The interview was aggravatingly unsuccessful, so far as enlightening information was concerned. The butler held his ground like an old soldier, despite the fact that at first his same manner had been against him. He was permitted to go.

"Well, what do you think of it, Carter?" Hollingsworth inquired with eagerness.

"I am in a quandary for the present, sir."

"You have three burdens on your shoulders."

"Yes, and I am frank to say that, up to date, I am three times baffled. These cases are without clues, save the bank intrigue. I will investigate Wimpley's story at once. In the meanwhile, Chickering Carter is to remain here. Chick, the coroner and the police will arrive in a few minutes. Keep close tabs. Watch the servants, especially Hicks. I shall doubtless call you up within an hour or so. If you want me, I will be at the house some time during the late afternoon."

At this very juncture the telephone bell jangled.

"They want you, Mr. Carter," Hollingsworth declared, handing over the receiver.

Nick went to the phone.

"Hello," he said.

"This is Patsy."

"Oh, hello Patsy. What is it?"

"I have news for you."

For nearly five minutes Nick Carter bent across the desk, receiving the message. Then he flashed back an excited command to Patsy, who was at the detective's Madison Avenue home, and hung up the receiver. As he turned to Chick, it was with a clouded brow.

"Chick," he said, "I never saw the like. Everything is happening at once. This last bit of news caps the climax. What do you suppose has happened?"

"I can't imagine."

"Vignaux has escaped from the Hackensack county jail."

"Impossible."

"Patsy says it is absolutely true. He had been held for a week. Then he managed to make his escape in some fashion and a woman was mixed up in the case. No names were mentioned and Patsy could not state, but I have every reason to believe that it was Marie Felix, the mother of the murdered Constantina."

"A bad man to have free."

"Such carelessness is inexcusable."

"But Vignaux is free, anyway?"

"That is Patsy's story, and he generally gets things right."

"We'll have to look out for him. He would do an injury to you in a second, Nick, if he got the opportunity."

"I rather think he has a personal cause for revenge."

After a casual leave-taking, Nick Carter met Wimpley in the lower hall. They entered Wimpley's cab, still in attendance, and were driven rapidly away.

The bank clerk became volubly talkative on the instant.

"You're a detective, aren't you?" was his first question.

"That is my profession, yes," Carter responded.

"Exciting business, isn't it?"

"Sometimes."

"I get an idea of the life from hearing our bank fellows talk. The old man is some considerable put out, isn't he?"

"Naturally enough."

"Over that necklace, eh?"

"Over many things," and Nick Carter looked up quickly.

"I think he's daffy, I do."

"What?"

"I say I think he's off his noodle."

"Explain yourself, please, Mr. Wimpley."

"Oh, I'm only repeating what I've heard his nephew say, and I guess he ought to know. His nephew is a sharp young man, you bet."

"I didn't know he had a nephew in New York?"

"Yes, he has; works down at the bank."

Nick Carter was about to question further, when Wimpley knocked violently at the glass front, and the cab came to a sudden stop.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEREIN A WOMAN ENTERS.

Mr. Wimpley, for all his furtiveness of glance, was not without a certain quick cleverness, and he could see with those eyes about four times as much as the average person, because he was forever glancing around. If anything escaped him it had to be rather well under cover.

"Here we are," he said, opening the cab door himself and jumping out, "I had the man stop right in front of the place. They wouldn't know, for we have a perfect right to go in here; but, honest, Mr. Carter, I have no idea that we shall find our man. Sufficient time has elapsed to allow of his escape."

"It strikes me as rather strange that he should wander around in this fashion, anyway," Nick Carter declared. "You say he was not in disguise?"

"He certainly was not."

"You are positive that you could identify him?"

"Well, I should say I could. Haven't I seen him in the bank a dozen times or more?"

A flight of brown steps led from the street to a big old-fashioned door above. While turned into a business building, the house had been a residence at one time. Ripping out walls and putting in a big glass window above gave it a commercial smack. In this window could be seen glaring posters, desks and framed lithographs. The sign of the vaudeville agency was posted just outside the door, from a stationary iron rod.

"Before we run up there, I want to ask you something more about this nephew of Hollingsworth's. Strange the old gentleman did not mention him to me."

"Well, I don't know anything about that, sir, of course."

"Are the two on good terms?"

"I should think so, but there may be some kink to it," and the shrewd, tallow-faced little clerk grinned slyly, and shrugged his shoulders after a fashion peculiarly his own.

"Then there is some story to this nephew business. Out with it, Mr. Wimpley, out with it."

"I'd rather not say anything, sir."

"Come, come, your duty is to lend every assistance possible. For instance, how long has this nephew been in Mr. Hollingsworth's employ at the bank?"

"About a month, Mr. Carter."

"Do you know where he came from?"

"Yes, from California, Mr. H.'s old home."

"Did he enter the bank immediately?"

"I think he did."

"Were his duties of a technical character?"

"Not exactly. He did anything he was called upon, from writing letters to carrying special messages. He was learning the business."

"Did his uncle seem to care for him?"

"He was mighty stern with him, I know that."

"Oh, he was, eh?"

"Yes, fired him once for carelessness, but Mr. Clynton got back in a few days."

"Did you ever hear them quarrel?"

"I hate to go into things like that, Mr. Carter; it's really none of my affair and——"

"Please proceed, Wimpley."

Carter could not avoid seeing that, despite all his affectations of reticence, Wimpley was really anxious to talk.

"Yes, sir, I did hear them quarrel once."

"Tell me about it," Carter continued.

"It wasn't long after the young gentleman had been reinstated. They were in the back room and I happened to be putting some ledgers in the second safe. They came in like two cats, spitting and fussing at each other. They did not see me, not because I was hiding, but they were too much interested in themselves. The substance of the tiff was that young Mr. Clynton wanted money—had wanted various sums from time to time, and it got on the old man's nerves. He came right out and said that he was tired of it, and that Mr. Clynton would have to first learn the value of money by earning some himself. Then there might be something doing."

"Ah, and what did Mr. Clynton say?"

"Oh, he fussed a bit and talked back. He has a temper of his own. Mighty handsome young chap, too."

"That was the only quarrel you ever heard?"

"I believe it was."

"Do you know where Mr. Clynton stops?"

"I don't. He eats at a club on the avenue, though."

"What club?"

"The Orchid."

"But you do not know his home address?"

"No, he's inclined to be quiet about such things. He never mixes with the rest of us at the bank."

"Does Clynton, to your knowledge, ever visit Hollingsworth at his Gramercy Park address?"

"I really couldn't tell you."

This appeared to be the extent of the clerk's fund of information. In any event, he shut up like a clam as the building was entered.

Two or three men were chatting in the hall, and from their general garb and pratter Nick Carter sized them up as cheap variety actors. No particular attention was paid to Wimpley and the detective. A flight of stairs led, halfway down to the hall, to the second floor. Armed with the best description of their man that Wimpley could give, Nick Carter left the clerk in the hall, one flight up, and made a systematic search of every individual office, room, nook and cranny. He had armed himself with a legitimate excuse to walk right in, and managed to go the rounds with no embarrassing results. But he joined Wimpley again, frowning.

"He is not on this floor or the ones above."

"I told you I thought he'd gone."

"Look here, Wimpley," the detective exclaimed impatiently, "if you thought that why should you encour-

age me to come around here at all. You seem to have it rather well decided that he *is* gone."

The clerk stammered and flushed.

"I only gave you my opinion; I didn't know. It's always best to make sure. You haven't looked downstairs in the theatrical bureau. He might be there, yes, he might be there. I'd certainly look most carefully."

There was a marked insistence and eagerness in the man's tone which puzzled the detective.

What was Wimpley trying to get at, anyway?

Every phase of his triplicate-fire case annoyed the famous sleuth. The baffling series of incidents; the sudden deviations from the natural course of things; the united policy of criminal secrecy and mystery set his faculties on edge.

Without waiting for Wimpley, Carter swung open the door of the vaudeville rooms and stepped in. A railing ran across the first open space, perhaps five feet away, and there were long benches, one or two dotted with disheveled specimens of humanity. Beyond were desks, framed prints and all the dust-ridden, pathetic trappings of the business. A typewriter droned lazily from somewhere, and from somewhere else a man was dictating a three-week-circuit sheet to a blonde.

Carter swept the offices with a swift, sure glance.

He did not see his man, as he had been carefully described by Mr. Wimpley. He had half turned to the door when he was suddenly, intuitively attracted toward the right, where a large old-fashioned desk was in evidence. He could see two heads over the top of it, a man's and a woman's. The woman had luxuriant brown tresses, and as much of her features as the detective could see were exceptionally strong and attractive. The face was the face of a fascinating person. The man, also, was not ill to look upon. He was rather dark, and he had the keen-cut, keen-eyed stamp of a young man of the world—a man who could not easily be fooled. What had attracted the detective more especially, however, was the unmistakable secrecy of their conversation. Their heads were together and not a thread of the talk escaped beyond the big desk.

Nick Carter felt a pluck at his coat sleeve.

He turned.

Mr. Wimpley, hidden from sight by the door, which he had pulled into the room as he entered from the hall, stood there, eyes staring, face a study of wrinkles, satisfaction and monkey-like malice.

"There he is now—that's him," he whispered.

"Where?" Nick Carter inquired, amazed.

He was face to face with a neat little dilemma, to be sure.

Without coming out from the door, Wimpley signified the very desk at which Nick had been so incently gazing a half second before.

"There."

"But that isn't the man you described to me."

"Oh, pshaw. That's Hollingsworth's nephew, young Mr. Clynton, as sure as I'm born," the clerk went on, guardedly. "I wonder what in beans he's doing here?"

Nick Carter, naturally, was prodded by a giant surprise.

"Clynton?" he ejaculated.

"Yes, sir."

"Is he interested in vaudeville?"

"I couldn't say. Look out, they're coming." With that, much to Nick Carter's increasing astonishment, Wimpley made the speediest get-away on record. He pulled the door backward and disappeared with it, just as a tall, smartly dressed young man, hat in hand, came through the gate at the railing. The woman followed him, a pencil with silver tip back of her ear. Nick had a splendid opportunity to watch the sweeping grace of her magnificent form and the queenly bearing, quite out of place in a shop of this half-rate character.

She was very, very beautiful.

Stopping at the gate, on the inside, she reached out her small, dainty hand.

"I shall see you then, as we had planned?" she asked.

Clynton smiled in return.

"Absolutely sure," he said.

There was no additional exchange of words. The woman returned to her desk and Clynton hurried to the door. He passed so near the detective that Nick could catch a strong whiff of an Oriental perfume. If this be young Mr. Clynton, he had all the qualifications of a "lady-killer." He was well set up, of magnificent physique, and while there was a subtle suggestion of the devilish in his black, sharp brows and his swift, keen eyes, he had a handsome, manly face, marred only by a weak chin.

Carter did not hesitate when they had both reached the street.

Clynton, drawing on a pair of gray gloves, threw back his chest, as if well satisfied with himself, and started off up the street in the direction of the avenue. Nick Carter was in pursuit. Strange to relate, both Wimpley and the cab had quite disappeared from the present scene of activity. The clerk's action, to say the least, was highly eccentric.

"I may be chasing about the wildest line of trotting gentry in town," the detective ruminated, quizzically, "but I'll stay on this one for a while. It looks as if I was handling about the most complicated piece of criminal machinery that human head ever devised. How will it all end?"

The trail was a direct one. Three blocks down they came upon the exclusive, semi-theatrical "Orchid Club." This did not annoy the detective. He had his private code of entry and it invariably proved infallible. He saw Clynton enter and followed in a few minutes. The man ahead could not have known that his footsteps had been carefully dogged.

At this hour of the afternoon the rooms, especially those on the first floor, were all but deserted. As soon

as he discerned Clynton take a seat in a shaded corner, Carter dropped casually into a cushioned chair not more than ten feet distant. He took several letters from his pocket, and, spreading them out, appeared to be very self-centred in his interest.

Clynton, it must be admitted, was equally nonchalant. Had the detective been made of putty, he could not have ignored his presence with more polished dignity and unconcern. He did once pull out his watch and glance at it. Once, also, he walked across the room to a window that fronted on the avenue, pulled aside the curtains and glanced out.

After this, he returned, settling back into his old position.

"Expecting some one," Nick Carter thought.

This was a perfectly correct and easy deduction. It was verified five minutes afterward.

A stout, smooth-shaven man came in. His walk was deferential, and Nick Carter gave a start, lifting a club paper before his face. If he was seen and recognized, it might do more harm to the progress of the case than any other one thing and, Heaven knows, progress was tediously slow up to that minute.

The man just entering, the man who joined Clynton at the table in the dark corner, was Mr. Randolph Hicks that chameleon butler; and so Carter's first impressions had not gone amiss? Now Hicks was no longer the puffy, obsequious servant but quite a dignified club member, if looks went for anything, and he was mingling with rather suspicious company to say the least.

But Nick Carter was cornered like a rat in a steel trap. The butler would recognize him the instant his face was exposed; Nick was morally certain of that. Slowly he swung around, the paper dropping upon his back-tilted face, and then he began to snore, not noisily, but a mere wisp of a satisfied wheeze that suggested weary yet contented slumber.

CHAPTER VII.

A COIL OF TWISTED WIRE.

In making a rapid summary of his adventures up to the hour before, Nick Carter, even as he had admitted to Chick, had been emphatically baffled by events. The Gramercy Park house had baffled him three times with three puzzling and entirely substantial crimes, of widely diverging character. He had encountered a dead wall, so far as clues were concerned, in the necklace robbery; the bank swindle was apparently minus practical fact; and the sudden, tragic death of the French girl, Constantina, completed the grewsome list.

Now the tables were turning, just a wee bit. Light, on at least one of the cases, was being developed and, in consequence, the detective breathed with more ease. A chain of connected evidence was being woven, and all very naturally and semi-accidentally.

The supposed drowsy club member stretched out his legs, and his snores decreased if anything, until only an occasional puff came from beneath the folded paper that covered his face and shut out the light.

Two tables beyond, in the corner, Clynton and Hicks were seated, talking in extremely low tones. At first the detective could hear nothing of what they said. After ten minutes, a word or so was wafted intelligibly to his ears. They were speaking in less guarded tones.

"You'll have to be exceptionally careful now," the butler suggested.

"What kind of a man was he?" Clynton broke in.

"Sharp as a knife. Dangerous."

"And you say there's still another one?"

"Yes, he was telephoned for, a young fellow. The Carters, you ought to know of them, even from their California reputations. Didn't you ever hear of that Pine Hill murder case; both the Carters were in 'Frisco at the time and put Big Left-arm in the toils."

"Don't seem to recall it, but, say, Hicks, we haven't any reason to worry. They can't know—they couldn't, that's all there is to it."

"Always wise to be strictly on the job. He had Billy and his wife up, and even put me through a cross-examination."

Clynton smiled grimly.

"I guarantee they didn't get much."

"Well, I guess not."

"I saw Barberry and Ila this morning and had a talk with the woman not long ago."

The butler appeared hugely interested.

"What did they say" he inquired.

"I think we can pull it off without any trouble."

"Haven't see anything in the papers yet."

"It's bound to be in the late papers, probably the last night edition. The old man kept it mighty quiet until he got the Carters on the case."

"Where are they going?"

"I haven't been able to make out their particular game as yet, but I *will* know."

"Good, that's part of your business, Hicks. If that dub crowd can get us, I'll go back to California and jump into a pail of water."

"They think you're a kid."

"Oh, they do, eh. Well, I'll show them that not all the smart ones come from New York before this week is over."

"You want to keep a close eye on the old man."

"Leave it to me, Hicks, leave it to me, but to-morrow night I'm off for a little real pleasure with business combined. The kids intend to give a fancy dance up at Peterson's; swell, I take it. All the rags will be there. I'll meet Ila; and the diamond king has promised to be there. The girl is a clever, clever sort, Hicks. I never quite appreciated her until to-day. She's all to the good."

"A powerfully pretty woman, eh?"

"Yes, that too."

Ila then, Nick Carter realized instantly, was none other than the fascinating beauty of the vaudeville

agency, with whom Nick had seen Clynton conversing. Just how complicated would the affair become, he pondered? And then there was the mention of the "diamond king," still a new and astonishing personage to deal with. The case was livening up beyond his wildest expectations.

If Clynton would only loosen up and tell where this "swell" dance was to be given. That was an essential fact to be learned. He must get it. That "must," however, had its limitations. Conversation at the table in the corner stopped with astounding rapidity, as if they might have suspected the chap asleep in the corner under the newspaper. A few minutes afterward, both left the room, slowly, talking in whispers as they departed.

As Nick pulled the curtains aside and looked out upon the busy street, he saw that darkness was settling rapidly, and that lights were glimmering and shimmering at uncertain intervals.

Clynton would, very probably, steer for home.

And this was another essential problem, yet to be learned.

Hicks parted from his companion at the corner, following a brief minute or so of conversation. Then Nick Carter took up the trail again, resolved to keep his man in sight if the run landed him at the ragged edge of nowhere. With much satisfaction, the detective found Clynton running up the steps of an Italian restaurant on one of the near side streets. He was fairly well acquainted with the place and knew that while there was a spaghetti joint on the first floor, the upper stories were given over to furnished rooms of a decidedly cheap character. Clynton might be fastidious and he might have his clubs but—did he indeed house himself in this locality?

Waiting five minutes, the detective followed his game up the stairs. The first person he happened to see was a blue-coated cloak-room boy, an Italian, and he knew the lad.

"Hello, Toney."

"Good evening, Mr. Carter—eat here to-night?"

"No, I want some information."

"What is it, sir?"

"A man came in just ahead of me?"

"Yes, sir; that was Mr. Clynton."

"I know him. Does he room here?"

"Yes, sir, he has a room on the third floor front."

"How long has he had that room?"

"Only for about a week."

"Does he ever receive visitors?"

"Sometimes, yes, sir."

"Know anything further about him?"

"Nothing, special, Mr. Carter, but——"

Toney could get no further, the detective having suddenly pinched his arm.

It was Clynton himself. A light coat was flung over one arm and he had changed hats. He appeared to be in a great hurry, for he almost ran past, stopping only to call back at the boy:

"If any one calls for me, tell them they can find me at the bank, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Toney responded.

When he had vanished, Nick Carter turned to the boy.

"I thought you told me you didn't know anything about him?"

"I knew he worked at the bank, yes, sir. I was about to tell you that."

"Very good; now, Toney, I guess you know what I'm after, for you've had to help me before. I want you to see that I find Clynton's room. I want to look over it for a few minutes. Needn't bother about a key; I'll get in all right. Can you leave here?"

"I guess so, sir."

In five minutes the boy had shown Carter to the room in question and had hurried back down the stairs. In less time than that the sleuth had used a certain slim key, opened the door, shut it again, and was just where he wanted to be, but in the dark, as no lights had been ignited, so he used his flash.

The room was a large and well-furnished one, with two windows opening on the front street. Blinds and shades were both drawn. A quaint old, cherry-colored bureau stood in one corner, three drawers deep. Without stopping to take up any other work, the detective opened those drawers, one by one, with his keys. The first contained laundry, the second books, scattered at random—books of a sensational character; the last was scantily filled. There were discarded razor strops, razors, leaves torn from notebooks, a jumble of all the little things that can be collected in a busy, nervous month. Nick Carter appeared to be looking for something, and he found it in one of the corners, tucked into the third holder of an empty razor case.

"Ah," he grunted, with much silent satisfaction. "Just as I suspected. This makes my little Hollingsworth puzzle as easy as a game of checkers."

The article, balanced on one finger was nothing more startling than a hoop of fine but very tough and serviceable copper wire.

* * * * * * *

It was fifteen minutes after nine that night when a big touring car ran up through the region of Gramercy Park to Mr. Hollingsworth's mansion and stopped. Danny, the chauffeur, and a trusted Carter assistant, knew every inch of New York and the surrounding sections. He could drive that car through traffic like a meteor, and if one did not have all the confidence in the world in his marvelous ability, their fears would accumulate with every block. But Danny was absolutely safe and sure.

As the machine came to a stop a young fellow bobbed out, all animation and energy.

This was Patsy.

"Hold her until I return with Chick, Danny."

"That I will."

Patsy was not long in gaining an entrance. He called for Chick, who happened to be in Mr. Hollings-

worth's office with the old man. Hollingsworth had gone to the bank but had returned after a brief stay there.

The body of the murdered girl had been removed and matters had settled down to comparative quiet, although a plain-clothes man, at the millionaire's request, was still on silent guard.

Chick joined Patsy in the lower hall. They talked partially in code and always in whispers, for Carter had warned Patsy over the wire that it was a house of many mysteries and tenfold ears.

"What are you doing here, Patsy?" Chick inquired in great astonishment at seeing his co-laborer.

"I just *had* to come—news."

"What kind of news?"

"You know I wired concerning Vignaux—that he had escaped from the Hackensack jail?"

"Yes, I know all that. I was in the room when Nick received the message. What else?"

"I think I can put my hands on him?"

Chickering Carter grasped his companion by the collar.

"Good gracious, is that on the level, Patsy," he exclaimed, rather incautiously.

"Yes."

"How did this happen?"

"I'll toss it over to you. Danny and I went out in the machine not long after I telephoned to Mr. Carter. Danny had some papers to deliver to Cross & Schmidy, in Wall Street, and I went along. As we were coming back we collided with another machine. It was a closed car and the windows were shaded by green curtains. I guess the driver must have been a little under the weather; at any rate, Danny couldn't stop in time, and we cut into that brougham in good fashion, smashing one of the windows."

"Sounds like trouble."

"Well," Patsy continued, with some emphasis and a twinkle of his bright eyes, "the minute that glass went spattering over everything the curtains swung out and we jabbed our boom into them too; they ripped off clean. I had a glimpse of a frightened face inside the car. Do you think I could mistake that fat, greasy Frenchman. Well I rather guess not; it was Vignaux just as sure as I am standing here."

CHAPTER VIII.

BY FORCE OF SUPERIOR ARMS.

Chick Carter became quite another person. He had enough confidence in Patsy to realize that Vignaux was indeed in New York; which signified that the Hackensack regions and his old Lodi stamping grounds knew him no more—temporarily at least. It was interesting news.

"Did Vignaux see you?" was Chick's first anxious question.

"No, he didn't," Patsy retorted.

"Sure of that."

"I'm reasonably certain. Everything was excitement, broken glass and cuss words. In the meanwhile the other car was adjusting itself to the road. It moved away and I told Danny to follow—to follow, by George, through red stuff and brimstone. I knew Nick and yourself would want me to keep after the dirty Frenchman."

"Correct with a capital C. But could you manage it?"

"Of course we could."

"There were no arrests?"

"No, because Vignaux did not dare enter any complaints."

"From what Nick has told me, I can well understand that he would not care to have his face photographed by a pair of police eyes. I guess by this time every one with a badge is on the lookout for Vignaux. I wonder how he got out of the Hackensack jail. Did you hear the full story?"

"No, simply that a veiled woman had called repeatedly upon him during his stay there. She managed to fix things up and he made his get-away."

"Must have been Marie Felix."

"I've thought that, too. Although the woman never came out with it, I think they were in love with each other, or had a very secret understanding."

"Go on with your narrative, Patsy."

"Danny did the proper thing. He kept just far enough away in the mess of trucks and traffic to keep us out of suspicion.

"Now, Chick, here is where the story gets interesting. You know Mr. Carter's private information concerning the bank swindle—Mr. Hollingsworth's bank?"

"I do."

"That a chap wandered in, said he had rented a store two or three blocks down from the bank on a side street and intended to start a dry goods establishment?"

"Yes."

"I think we have that place. Our trail ended there."

"Get away with you, Patsy. Do you think Vignaux had anything to do with that. Do you think, anyway, for an instant, that the man would continue to fool around that old vacant store after its rental had served his purpose?"

"I'm simply telling you what I think, and then again, what I know. Vignaux entered the vacant store; it was three blocks from Hollingsworth's bank, too, and on a side street.

"But Vignaux has been in jail. He couldn't have been mixed up in it. You're talking foolish."

"Perhaps I am; you'll have to prove it to me however. After winding around a good deal, the busted machine pulled up three doors from the store."

"I follow you."

"Vignaux got out and the auto buzzed away."

"Yes."

"The Frenchman was all bundled up. You could scarcely see his face. He walked twenty feet down,

with me keeping my peepers on him, and gained an entry way—one of those narrow fellows, Chick, where you have to dodge and stoop to keep from having your block knocked off."

"And you left Danny?"

"Certainly I did. I hot-footed it after Vignaux. I saw him go down the entry way and disappear. Two doors beyond was a rather large vacant store. One of the windows was knocked out and it didn't look good to me. It was a dreary section where no dry goods store could have sold even a spool of thread."

"Did you go up the entry way?"

"I did."

"And then what?"

"I simply ventured it, that's all. I entered, went its limit and came out into a sort of greasy little court where clothes were flapping on lines and children as mean and as trifling as the court were playing. I was just in time to see Vignaux open a gate, enter the connecting yard and disappear."

"Would you judge that he entered the rear of the vacant store?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

Chickering Carter whistled. Patsy had played a lone hand with a trump up his sleeve all the while.

"Anything else, Patsy?"

"Only one thing. I dodged around the alley corner and watched. Ten minutes afterwards, in a wing of the store, I saw a dusty window push upward and I caught a glance of a face, of Vignaux."

"We'll have to let Nick know of this instantly. He said we could get him sometime during the evening at the house."

"I haven't been there. You can search me. We might run around and call up Joseph."

"An excellent idea."

"Do you know where Mr. Carter is now?"

"He was tracking Wimpley, one of the bank clerks, the last I knew."

"But he promised to call up the house?"

"Yes."

"There's one thing that worries me in all this, Patsy," Chick continued; "we know that the bank was swindled and the details of that swindle, but how does Vignaux enter into the deal? He was lodged in the Hackensack jail during the period of the intrigue."

"He might have something to do with it, just the same."

"Certainly looks that way."

"You don't have to stay here?'"

"No, I guess not. I was around when the police came and that was what Nick wanted most of all. The servants look straight to me. Mr. Hollingsworth will have a friend stay with him all evening, and there's Jamesey, the plain-clothes man from headquarters!"

"Then trot along. If we can't get Mr. Carter by phone we'll leave word with Joseph and see what can be learned at the store. I'd like to add juice to this case by landing Vignaux at the same time. I guess the boss wouldn't object."

"It would tickle him to death."

Both joined Danny and they were driven to the nearest boxed phone. Joseph was as dry as a ten-year field pumpkin. No, Nick Carter had neither telephoned nor been to the house. All was quiet.

"Will you go?" Patsy inquired eagerly."

"To the store?"

"Well, I rather guess."

"Fine and dandy," and Patsy's fighting blood was up to fever heat on the instant. He liked a scrimmage when it was on the side of law and order and justice. Vignaux had slipped through their hands so very often that it was becoming a real humiliation.

It did not take very long to rattle around in the machine, and Danny was instructed to stop at the second corner. There was no need to take any foolish chances of detection, especially when they were on detailed duty; and they certainly intended to nab Vignaux if there was the slightest show to do so. Some slight change in their personal appearance had been made in a dark waiting spot, for the automobile was invariably stocked with the materials for disguise. They could never tell when they would need it.

As they entered the little entry way, up from the deserted store, they wore rough clothing and looked like two roughs out of a job.

"Shall we go right in?" Patsy asked.

"That's what I'm counting on doing," Chick returned; "I can't see that we have anything else to do. The front part of the store is all dark. I wouldn't want to blunder down through that maze. They could pick us off as burglars or any old thing. No, the straight and narrow path, Patsy."

"Then I'll show the way."

"Go ahead."

The courtyard was all but deserted; moreover, the yard beyond the fence with a gate, through which Vignaux had gone, was still more lonely and uninviting. But Patsy stopped Chick just long enough, as they entered this second courtyard, to point upward to the little bleak wing.

"See that?"

"A light."

"You bet, that was the window."

"How did he enter?"

"I think it was that door over there," and Patsy pointed to a rickety, forlorn flight of steps that reared from the darkness of the court to an equally dilapidated door.

Both hesitated at the top step, once certain that the door was not locked.

"What is the lay if they get us?" Patsy asked.

"Wandered in for a place to sleep for the night—out of a job."

"Oh, it's dead easy."

They soon found themselves in an upper hall. It was still a part of the main store front, but ran the entire distance from left to right. Midway was a door—and it was locked. Chick, as clever with trick keys as Nick Carter, did not have to wait very long.

He threw the portal wide after some fumbling and with the assistance of a little streak of yellow light that emanated from his flash. The air that was flung back by the draught was heavy and sodden and stale and made both gasp as they stepped forward, softly closing the door behind them. Everything was totally dark and Chick would not now trust his flash. They must make progress as best they could.

A whispered conversation ensued.

"We've got to do it," Chickering declared.

"What?" Patsy answered, in a quandary.

"Chatter a spiel. Talk as if you were well under the weather. I'm looking for you because you're drunk. We're both drunk, see."

"I catch."

Patsy began to shuffle along the dark hall with heavy boots. Chick did likewise. At the same moment both growled, swore and stormed, in a foolish sort of fashion, butting against the walls and making a deal of disturbance. It was a clever ruse.

Now they saw a light ahead.

It must surely come from the one room, the window of which was to be seen from the courtyard below.

"Come on, Bill," Chick grumbled groggily.

"Hic—ain't I comin'?" Patsy put in.

There was no need for further pantomime. A door suddenly opened. It opened to the left of the hall with a bang that was like a revolver shot, and a man sprang out. The two detectives could not see him very distinctly at first, for they were not only astonished but blinded by the beams that cut into the gloom.

The newcomer was challenging, not alone by word of mouth, but, as the two looked, they could see the glint of light on a revolver barrel.

"Halt! who goes there?"

It was like a military challenge and from a throat deep and guttural of intonation. All the while the steady snout of a gun poked straight out from the darkness, with the indefinite square of flickering illumination from the door.

"Hey, brace up, Bill; somebody here, guess we've made a mistake," Chick Carter fumed, bracing his partner, who seemed to take the adventure as a sea voyage and was rolling around the hall in great fashion.

"All right, all right," Patsy answered thickly.

"Don't you take another step," the voice said from behind the gun. "What you doing in here?"

"Vignaux," Chick said to himself.

Patsy was muttering the same name.

"Say, pard," Chick put in, "no harm intended, on the level. We thought this here was an old vacant store. We came in here to sleep the stuff off. Can't we?"

There was a slight pause.

The man behind the gun appeared to be thinking it over.

"Step up here into the light," he finally said.

Neither Chick nor Patsy hesitated. They rolled and staggered down the hall, until they both stood in the glare of the oil lamp from the side room. The stranger, in the meanwhile, had backed to the doorway, gun still in readiness, surveying them with critical eyes.

They did not look especially presentable in their rough disguise. Patsy was blinking and rolling his eyes. Chick was doing his best to hold him erect.

"You're a pair of liars," the man snapped viciously: "only one way to get in here and that was by that hall door—and I locked it myself, five minutes ago."

CHAPTER IX.

WRONG AGAIN.

Both Chickering Carter and Patsy were quick-witted enough to appreciate the telling irony of that sudden challenge from Vignaux. The entire foundation of their story was crumbling because of the sharp wits of a clever criminal. Naturally enough, if the door at the dark end of the store had been locked—and it had been—these seemingly intoxicated street loafers could not have wandered in as easily as their impromptu narrative might imply. And Vignaux had nailed the falsehood—the obviously false note.

Chick saw a path through the difficulty, embarrassing as it was. He resolved to work it. All the while, he was keeping a pair of watchful eyes on the man with the revolvers. It was Vignaux, surely enough, the fat, pudgy Frenchman, with the same glittering eyes and the same habit of shifting one shoulder blade, when nervous.

"Now looky here, pard," Chick broke in, ignoring the guns, "we ain't no bad sort, onct you knows us. Now that you've got the hunch on us, we'll 'fess up. We're boys with the second-story knowledge and we did lift that latch back there, but, holy smoke, you ain't goin' to begrudge a feller a place to sleep, are you? Does this here empty store look like a job we'd fixed up. I don't see no gold nuggets waitin' to be pinched."

At thus juncture, Patsy, who was working his end of it to the limit, slipped from his companion's grasp and sank to the floor, where he began to give vent to long-drawn, vociferous drunken snores, as if oblivious to his surroundings, the light, the guns and the conversation, as a hitching post.

"Me fr'en's sick, he is," Chick insisted pleadingly. "We won't stay if you says nixie, but there ain't no good reason, bo, why you shouldn't let us sleep off a bit of the stuff back here somewheres?"

"What made you come around here," Vignaux inquired, with less suspicion in his voice. "Why didn't you go into the front part of the store?"

"Can't get in front without a cop seein' you at this time o' night," Chick speedily retorted. "We come down the alley and around here. It looked good an' quiet."

"I want to have another good look at the both of you," the clever and suspicious schemer insisted, as

he stepped to one side, leaving the door clear; "you fellows come on in here a minute; bring him in, too; wake him up." This concerning Patsy, a huddled, inanimate stack of battered humanity against the drab wall.

"I'll bring him wid me, but he's up agin' it good an' proper," Chick declared. He lifted Patsy, feigning slumber, carried him inside the lighted room and deposited him with precious little ceremony or consideration upon the floor, back to the wall. There Patsy sat, still snoring, still swearing and complaining under his breath in his sleep. He was, apparently, dead to the universe.

The room, Chick noted, was still a poor one and a makeshift. An old desk had been scrubbed off clean, and there were papers scattered upon it. Three cracker boxes served as chairs. Upon the south wall hung an enormous map of New York City, its streets and its railroad lines, every ramification of business.

"Looks like temporary headquarters for the scoundrel," the detective thought.

He stood by his "pal," awkwardly, one hand in a pocket, his ragged old cap in the other, and feet sprawled wide apart. Vignaux looked at him for two or three minutes, watched him like a hawk, his portly body braced against the desk, upon which now he had placed his shining guns. He must have reached a satisfactory conclusion, for he slowly drew up one of the boxes and sat down.

"Who are you?" he asked bluntly.

"Brace Mullens."

"And your friend?"

"Oil Williams—we calls him Bill."

"Where do you come from?"

"Me, I come from Chicago, that's me hang-out. Bill, he's a St. Louis man. I came here two days ago and struck it rank, pard. Then I ran in with Bill. He had thirty-eight dollars an' we been drunk on it ever since."

"I think you're a pair of strong-arm men?"

"Well now, say, we don't look like no embroid'ry artists, does we, an' if it's comin' to a talk on morals er the like o' that, you can cut it and we's dangle. What we does ain't got nothing to do with what you does, understand."

"I'm not discussing the moral side of it," and Vignaux laughed coldly.

"All right then, pard."

"Got anything framed up for the week?"

"Nothin'."

"Do you think you could sober up and tackle a job if it was handed to you on a silver platter? You couldn't be trusted with that booze in you."

"Talkin' straight, pard?"

"I am talking business, yes."

Chick Carter took a step nearer the table, emphasizing his words with a glance, at once aggressive and pregnant with meaning. Vignaux, still skeptical, slid a pair of fat hands across the table to his guns. He was taking no chances whatever.

"Bill an' me is lookin' for somethin' to do—anything, mister," Chick whispered, "now go on with your gab. What is it?"

Vignaux rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Have you ever heard of Nicholas Carter?"

"What, the detective? You bet!"

"And a certain slick partner of his, Chickering?"

"Oh, everybody knows those blokes. They're a pair of trouble hunters; that's what they is."

"Then you don't have any particular love for them?" Vignaux asked, a cynical grin crossing his countenance.

"Just trust me to knife 'em if there was a show at it."

"How does your friend Bill feel?"

"Bill—he is as sore as a crab at Chick Carter. Bill lost half o' one ear by him bein' shot by the fly cop. You see, the gun busted the drum an' Bill don't hear no more on that side."

"Splendid," the Frenchman declared. He got down to business immediately. The sum and substance of that conversation was that Vignaux desired the two crooks, as he supposed, to bring Nick Carter to the deserted store—to that rear room—and there to dispose of his case without fear or ceremony. If it was possible to draw Chick away from the case in hand, then so much the better.

"The fat fiend," Chick grunted to himself.

"Say, where d'ye want me ter look fer 'em," Chick asked, hoping to draw still more from the scoundrel.

"I will give you an address," Vignaux declared. He wrote upon a sheet torn from a little red memorandum book, and handed it to Chick. It was Hollingsworth's number, off Gramercy Park. Vignaux did not have his dates mixed in the least. Patsy was now stirring, yawning and complaining to himself in one corner. Chick shook him, swearing roundly.

"I'll get him up, give him a good walk in the air and get some spice in him," the detective commented. "Say, we can get busy on this here to-night. I'm prime fit, since I got a bug in me noodle. You want either one of them kiddos tumbled up into this here room?"

"That is the idea."

"And how'll we know when you'll be here?"

"I am here a great deal of the time. I shall be here until to-morrow night."

"Then we do the trick, pard."

"How much in it, eh?"

This from Patsy, just getting over a yawn that tested the elasticity of his facial muscles. He was winking and blinking in the light.

"I would wait until your friend sobers up," Vignaux said pointedly.

"Oh, he's all right," Chick hurriedly put in. He did not want to spend the night in that rookery. His plans were well formulated, and they only needed his chief's final O. K.

After a few parting words of warning from the Frenchman, and after Patsy was compelled to go through the mock ceremony of having his face soused

in a basin of cold water, the two sleuths found their way to the street again. Vignaux, for all his cleverness, had been duped neatly enough.

"Looks like a hot night to-night," Patsy laughed. They found Danny patiently awaiting their return. The big auto softly glided from the vicinity.

"I'm out trying to kill myself, Patsy," Chick smiled.

"But what're you going to do, Chick?"

"Keep my word with the Frenchman?"

"What?"

"You bet. I'm going to bring Nick Carter, bound hand and foot, to that nest in the deserted store."

"But suppose we can't find Nick?"

"We're certain to. He never stays away longer than twelve hours without telephoning to the house. Unless some of the rascals have him, we'll carry this through to a hot finish."

"I see the ticket. All three of us go up and clean up Vignaux?"

"Of course."

"But we could have worked it by ourselves. I can manage that fat old Frenchman by my lonesome."

"You're doing small thinking, Patsy."

"Oh, you think there are others?"

"Sure I do."

It was after midnight when they reached Madison Avenue and the house. Chick was eager to see if Nick had returned. Much to his delight, Nick was in his office upstairs and awake. A tray stood on his desk and he was just about to light a cigar.

Chick began explaining immediately. As the story progressed, Nick Carter grew steadily more puzzled.

"I can't understand this, Chick," he finally remarked.

"In what way?"

"I somehow fail to grasp the connection, the relationship between Vignaux and the bank swindle."

"I guess he's an all-around bad man."

"Granting that he is, he has been in jail. We know that. This bank swindle was pulled off while he was still behind the Hackensack bars. If the Frenchman is mixed up in it, he must have a confederate, and yet, by gracious."

"What is the matter?"

"I was recalling the description given me of Plurey by the clerk. His description of the swindler might well cover Vignaux; it was identical, as far as I recall it."

"Well, what do you think of that?"

"I do not know what to think. I have rounded up my diamond robbery in good shape. It is not troubling me. The murder looks like an easy one, if I am not very much mistaken; but Vignaux—do you think we could risk going there to-night—say at a late hour—three in the morning?"

"Rather rushing it. I wouldn't."

"Then to-morrow morning?"

"That would be better."

"And I am to go as your prisoner and be prepared for a violent death."

"We have been chartered to cook your goose, Nick."

"It is just as well that we wait. I want some rest. I've been going it for twenty-four hours. I was much interested in Hollingsworth's nephew. Clynton has let out just enough rope."

"You visited his rooms?"

"Yes."

"Any clues?"

"The one I absolutely had to have, yes."

"Tell us about it."

"Not to-night. I want to be very sure before I deal in bravado. It is sufficient to say that we have never handled such a complicated, three-sided piece of villainy."

"Where were you in the early evening?"

"I have tried to locate Madam Marie Felix."

"And you were not successful. She is one of the most slippery women we ever tackled."

"No, I have not traced her. I saw Georges Taverier, at the Belvedere, and had a log book chatter with him as exhaustive as I could make it. He swears he has not seen Marie since the old Yellow Door days."

"What do you want of her, anyway, Nick?"

"I want to question her concerning poor little Constantina. I believe half an hour with Marie would make the mystery much less puzzling."

"She was seen in Hackensack."

"I may have to go over there, but I am trying to avoid it."

It required much jockeying and horse-play to accomplish their rather amusing decoy job on the following day. Nick Carter slept until almost noon. Patsy and Chick wormed into their make-ups of the day previous, while Nick Carter attempted no disguise whatever. The trio were driven by Danny in the closed machine to a little side street livery stable, and here Nick talked long and earnestly with Chimney Mull, an old nighthawk cabman, often employed by the sleuths in their important cases. By one, the cab had reached the vicinity of the vacant store. The day was one admirably suited to the work, for big black clouds had swooped over the city, making it almost as dark as night.

Through these clouds, heat lightning played with startling flashes of color, and the long, heavy mutterings from the disturbed heavens struck an odd note not often heard over Manhattan. It was like a southern summer storm.

While in the cab, Nick had been bound, hand and foot, and a gag placed over his mouth. He was also blindfolded. Ropes, gag and black cloth over eyes were mere shams. Nick could be free when he was so disposed, the gag did not inconvenience him, and he could see through two tiny slits in the black cloth.

At an opportune moment, with thunder rumbling and rain beginning to spatter along the narrow street, the detective was lifted from the cab and hurried into the obscure entry way. A storm of clothes beat and fluttered on criss-cross lines of the court, and a woman

was trying to rescue them from the rain as Patsy and Chick rushed their burden through the gate and into the lonely, deserted yard beyond.

The house door was open and they made their way up the steps to the long hall, back of the store. Everything had gone beautifully, so far. But the door to the rear wing was locked. Patsy rapped softly with dextrous knuckles.

A minute, fully, elapsed.

A pair of keen eyes had watched, no doubt from one of the wing windows, for the door was speedily opened. Chick could just see the shadowy face beyond, but it was their man. Nick Carter also saw it, through his bandage, as he was carried through the door, and he felt a shock of sudden amazement.

Patsy and Chick must have blundered.

According to his private and individual reckonings, this man was *not* Vignaux at all.

CHAPTER X.

NICK DEALS THE CARDS.

Handicapped as he was by the black cloth over his eyes, Nick Carter did see the face, as the door was opened. He saw it with absolute distinctness a few seconds afterward, as he stood in the office room, the lamp helping to relieve the darkness brought on by the thunderclouds and the pattering rain. That face was not five inches from the glare of the wick, as the supposed bank swindler sat at the table and gloated over what he had every right to believe was a genuine triumph.

No, it was *not* Vignaux.

But this statement deserved qualifications.

The man Patsy and Chick had mistaken for the Frenchman was so like the original that they might well have been twin brothers. In build, in color of complexion, in mannerisms, even to the peculiar twitch at the shoulders, in voice and in general details, the similarity was startling. Nick Carter knew that this similarity could come only from blood relationship. It was not a coincidence. The men were brothers, unquestionably.

The real Vignaux, figuring in two sensational Carter cases, had dark hair, while Chick's Vignaux had reddish-brown hair, cropped rather short. Then there was a still more important difference: The original Vignaux had suffered an accident at some time. His thumb of the right hand was shorter than it should have been and slightly doubled, as if the tendons had pulled it into this cramped position. The man Nick Carter now saw had two perfectly matched thumbs.

A climax was a matter of a very few seconds, however, and Nick did not attempt to interfere with the natural course of events, as previously planned by the ever-reliable Chick.

"You made quick work of it, eh?" Vignaux's double declared, smiling malignantly.

Chick was primed for action and conversation. He knew his little book by heart.

"It was just luck, pard."

"Where did you get him?"

"In the basement of that house you sent me to."

"What? In the basement?"

"Yes, me and Bill went around there that same night. We hung around till nearly mornin', an' there was nothin' doin'. Bill, he went acrost for a sandwich —no, sir, no drink. While he was gone, this here Carter came out by the basement way. He was snoopin' among the rubbish, and I nailed him. At first he had me goin', but Bill came back and we gave him the heavy mitt. It was gettin' light an' we didn't know exactly what was our next cue."

"Dangerous business," the man by the lamp exclaimed, his dark eyes dancing.

"Sure it was, an' we want the dough. Now, here's what took place next: We seen a cab come by what we knowed the driver of and we got the lad inter it before you could light a match. We went right around to Paddy's stable—he has his own, and laid up till we could rig up this here guy in his traps and keep him from talkin' too much."

The story was running smoothly, Carter was willing to concede.

"When it got drowsy an' the clouds piled up, Bill said we could venture it an' so we did. Here you are, pard."

"What did he say about all this?" the stranger inquired.

"He didn't say much of nothin', 'cept ter put up a stiff fight."

"Are you sure no one saw you enter this place?"

"Ain't no trouble on that score."

"Bring him up here and take off that bandage and the gag."

"Sure."

Nick Carter was led directly to the table on the opposite side from the man in the lamplight. Then the black cloth was slipped from his eyes and the gag removed from his mouth. The cords were still wound about his arms and legs and Chick had been compelled to half lift him and to stand him in an upright position.

Carter, with no special expression indicative of any mood, looked full into the face of the personage so strangely resembling Vignaux.

That glance was returned with a concentration of hatred at once intense and antagonistic. It was the sudden, angry gleam of triumph and of approaching revenge.

"How are you, Carter?"

The words slowly, easily slipped from the full red lips.

"You've got me this time?" the detective replied.

"Sure we have. Why didn't you figure that this day would come, sooner or later?"

It was the vital moment.

"What have *you* against me; I never saw you before."

"I suppose not?"

The man smiled in a sardonic fashion.

"I have never seen you before, I repeat."

"You have seen some one who resembles me greatly, eh?"

"Oh, yes, I have seen your brother."

"You have wronged my brother."

There was emphasis in the sentence. The fat man on the other side of the table half raised himself from the box, his muscles quivering with rage. Nick had worked along the correct lines. He could not look backward, to see the effect of this interview upon Patsy and Chick, but he realized that their astonishment must have been tremendous.

"My business is that of seeing law and order enforced."

"You go too far, at times; you meddle."

"That is simply a difference of opinion, Mr. Vignaux."

"My brother will join me presently. Perhaps he will have something interesting to say."

"I should like to see him; he has much to account for. In the meanwhile, we might discuss a certain proposition of mutual interest, also. That was a clever deal you worked on Hollingsworth's bank and you got away with it; but in the future, you fellows will have to be careful. Have you seen the bulletins issued by the Pinkerton agency?"

Vignaux did not appear unusually surprised at this statement, nor did he express any fear.

"I have seen the bulletin," he replied calmly.

"What do you think of it?"

"I have not thought of it at all. We will run into fifty thousand dollars in three days on the same scheme and then in three or four days all of the Pinkertons can whistle."

"Brave and confident about it?"

"Why not."

"Then you have the nets out still?"

The man nodded defiantly.

"Rather unconventional offices you have fixed up here. It surprises me to think that you'd stick to the same store."

"Oh, that is one of our rules of procedure. This is the last place you chaps would ever think of looking for us. The store was a dead one and always has been. The wing back here hasn't been used for fifteen years. We just moved in, and there you are."

"I admire your nerve."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter."

"I have a little question to ask, if you do not mind. Why am I treated to this most cordial opportunity of talking over business matters with you?"

"Because your doom is sealed."

The humor of the voice and manner had suddenly disappeared. Vignaux was no longer frothy in speech. Hate gleamed from his dark eyes and he ruffled his red hair with nervous, excitable fingers.

"My doom, eh?"

"That is what I said."

"Still I can't quite make it out. Do you mean to murder me?"

"You will never leave this house alive."

"Good, I'm anxious for some excitement; even a local irritant would relive the monotony of the occasion. In closing let me ask, why this enmity? I have not been bothering my head about the bank swindle."

"You are on the case?"

"You have no proof of it."

"I know Hollingsworth would employ you. My men found you at his house, didn't they?"

"There might be other reasons——"

"We are taking no chances."

"Then I guess I won't."

Nick Carter's move, on the spur of the moment, was brought about by his short summary of circumstances and conditions. He knew that the second Vignaux would appear on the scene in a very brief period. He knew that this was a wonderful opportunity to close forever one corner of his triangle of crime and rascality. He was able to perform a duty to banks and all humanity in general that did not happen every day in the year. His cords, as we have stated before, were tied in a trick way. The very second that his muscles swelled and his wrists turned and ankles swung outward the ropes dropped from his body. Chick had attended to all that. He was as free as air and his fist, it must be said, in justice to the little giant, caused some unhappiness on the other side of the low desk. A fat, perturbed Frenchman was bowled over backward, with a bleeding nose, the box on top of him and his legs kicking in space. Nick Carter's terrific blow in the face had silenced for a brief period one factor in his trials and tribulations.

"Get him, boys; use these ropes," Carter called.

Patsy and Chick were equal to the occasion. They had Vignaux bound, gagged and helpless in a remarkably short time, and he was deposited in a dark corner behind the desk in a jiffy.

With a satisfied smile, the detective watched his assistants.

"Well?" he said. "Well."

"By gracious, that was beautiful," Chick gurgled.

"And such a cinch," Patsy added.

"You know who is expected?" Carter went on.

"The real Vignaux," Chick said. "I must admit this fellow had me fooled. They do look a lot alike."

"Certainly they do—twin brothers."

"We can kill two birds, then, to-night?"

"Great expectations. That is my hope. We must keep deucedly quiet now; not a word from any one. Patsy, do you stand over the rascal under the desk. If he makes a whisper or a groan under that gag, let him have a bullet. I do not intend to worry with this crew at all."

"Shall we turn out the light?"

"No, certainly not. Let it burn, but keep away from that court window. No shadows, understand,

that can be seen from below. I have shuffled my cards and I think, now, with this last deal, I am ready to play straight trumps, right through to the close of the game."

Even as he spoke, the sound of a closing door, far down the hall, in the outer wing, could be distinctly heard.

"Now, hush, quiet," the detective cautioned.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE NIGHT OF THE BALL.

It was one of those tense periods of time when every nerve responds to the slightest sensation, and when the heart pumps blood through every artery with a new and tempestuous thrill. Some one, in the outer gloom of the long hall, had opened the door leading from the main store, and was coming softly to the lighted room. There was every reason to believe it was the only and original Vignaux. Intermittently, the long rolls of thunder sounded from the court, and the old house trembled upon its foundation. The window was destitute of shutters, and the grayish black sky, rimming the decrepit shanty houses, held as a background for the gashing display of storm fireworks.

Within that room the picture was melodramatic to an extreme. Nick Carter, a revolver in his right hand, stood in a waiting, crouching position to the right of the entrance, so that when the door should be opened, swinging back, it would conceal his body. Patsy and Chick, in their tough disguises, were farther back in the room, illuminated very distinctly by the flickering oil lamp, Patsy standing, Chick seated on one of the boxes.

A frightful pause and——

The door was pushed inward from the hall and a man swiftly strode in.

Nick, Patsy and Chick gave low exclamations of surprise.

The newcomer was Mr. Wimpley, Esquire.

* * * * * * *

Danny, the lightning chauffeur, had just rolled Nick Carter's big automobile up in front of his Madison Avenue house and was still seated in the car, when, much to his amazement, a trim little girl, dressed neatly in a pink-flowered dress, gained the rear seats and patted Danny on the shoulder. He whirled around, to see the delicate child, sweet-faced and bright of eyes.

"Why, hello, hello, Flori," Danny exclaimed.

"Howdy, Mr. Danny."

"What you doing here? I haven't seen you for a long time."

"I want to see Mr. Carter."

"But Mr. Carter isn't in just now. He's out on a case."

"Pshaw, I'm sorry."

Flori looked troubled, and her white, even brow became puckered.

Flori, as the reader may imagine, was not unknown to Nick Carter and his retinue of assistants. Some time back, Nick had been instrumental in saving the little child from the clutches of a drunken and brutal French father. Nick had been through the old French Quarter on a very important case that involved not only Marie Felix but Vignaux, and the little flower girl had appealed to the detective as being worthy of a better fate. He had her placed in a home, from which she was later stolen by her father, who needed her in many of his nefarious operations. Flori had been rescued, however, and this time Carter saw to it that she was well cared for and watched. As the days drifted, it seemed that she would be left alone, to grow up to become a good and beautiful woman.

"I can't see why you are out alone, Flori," Danny inquired, "you know what Mr. Carter said about that?"

Flori was much excited. She simply gripped Danny's big, powerful arm, pinching it.

"He'll be glad I *did* slip away," she answered.

"Anything up?"

"There certainly is, Mr. Danny; I'll tell you, then you can tell Mr. Carter. You know yesterday I went out for a walk. Well, I lost Annie in the crowd, but I knew where I was all right. Dad slipped up on me as I was sitting on a bench in the park. Oh, he looked fine and prosperous; he had a new suit and a collar and his nose wasn't so red as it used to be. He wasn't mean to me, but kept asking questions about Mr. Carter, and where he lived and things like that. I made out as if I was tired of those nurses and goody folks and he believed me. I went around to where he and the others are staying. It's a house, a hotel, on the East Side. Who do you suppose was there but Madam Felix. She was packing her things and I heard her tell somebody there that I didn't know, that she was going abroad by a steamer that sails to-morrow or next day."

Danny's eyes were bulging by this time.

"Well," Flori continued, "I saw enough to make me sure that they were doing something crooked again. The madam was talking and talking about a bank and about her daughter, Constantina. They said Constantina had been murdered and that they were going to fix whoever did it. The madam was taking out a very pretty dress and she was going somewhere to-night where they dance and have a good time. I couldn't tell where it was, but she can dress, can the madam, and she could go to one of those big hotels if she wanted to, and people would say she was mighty nice."

"I guess they would," Danny returned thoughtfully.

"I think I'd like to ride around to the home in this big choo-choo thing if Mr. Carter wouldn't care, Mr. Danny."

"Pull up the robes, bless you, kid; you can have a

spin on the avenue before we do it. I guess Mr. Carter would be willing to have the car turned over to you for a century run after what news you've brought."

Flori clapped her hands with glee.

"Mr. Danny," she said, looking up into the face of the strong, hardy-featured chauffeur, "when I grow up and if I'm han'some, can I marry you? I'd just like to live in one of these here red movables."

And Danny laughed until his merriment could be heard a block away.

* * * * * * *

Mr. Wimpley took one step into the poorly lighted room, and, catching sight of Chick and Patsy, drew back with a noticeable shiver of apprehension. Mr. Wimpley was not strong physically, and he had about as much courage as a wilted collar. He caught the whiff of danger in the air.

The surprise was so great that Nick Carter was at a loss for action for the moment. He flashed a high sign from the open door to Patsy and Chick, however, and before Mr. Wimpley, whining and complaining and begging, could even raise a cry, he was flung to the floor and put in a state of bondage that must have been most humiliating to a gentleman of his æsthetic temperament.

Fortunately, Nick Carter had not left his position by the door. He suspected another peg would be fitted in another hole and he was correct. Vignaux blustered upon the scene, having been delayed, doubtless, below, and he fired his revolver the very second he noted the situation. Patsy flung up one arm, grasping with the other hand at a point just beneath his elbow where a bullet had nipped the flesh. But Vignaux was firing again.

Three spiteful reports crashed upon the air, deadened somewhat by the rolls of thunder, growing more vehement as the time passed. Smoke began to drift above the heads of the fighting, struggling party, and Wimpley, yelling like a hamstrung cat, rolled around on the floor, beneath it all, in the agonies of a great and overpowering panic.

Nick Carter held the reins. Vignaux, in dashing upon the scene, had not noticed the detective beyond the banging door. He only realized that something unusual was taking place and that two tough ruffians had assaulted poor Wimpley. Carter swung up like a cyclone from the rear. As one of the fat Frenchman's hands swung a revolver into dead-shot line again, the detective grabbed both arms, wrenching them backward until the tendons were all but snapping.

The gun clattered to the floor.

"I guess we have them all now," Nick declared casually.

Vignaux, swearing in his own language and stamping a pair of well-shod feet that were rapidly being wrapped around with strong cord, was finally in the toils. It was, perhaps, the very neatest Carter round-up that had been pulled off in years, for it meant every phase of a triangle of mystery and crime.

"We can't bother with the cab, Chick," the detective declared. "Patsy, run down as quickly as you can. Get Danny or Joseph on the wire—you will find a phone at Hecker's drug store, two and a half blocks up. Tell Danny to run the car as quickly as he can, right down to the mouth of the entry way. In the meanwhile, we shall attend to these gentlemen."

"Yes, sir."

In a driving summer rain, with streets that were gloomy and cut by glittering reflected streaks of lightning, Nick Carter and his assistants loaded up the closed machine with their crew of criminality. The twin Vignaux brothers and Mr. Wimpley were bundled into the closed space, and when all were aboard, Danny, regardless of wet streets and skidding tires, bumped to Madison Avenue, stopped a second or so and then made for the nearest police station at a rate of speed at once disturbing and antagonistic to the wide-eyed officers on their traffic beats.

Speed was an essential, too, for Nick Carter realized only too well that one side alone of his triangle had been cleaned up. He wanted to attend a certain dance that night, and he wanted Chick and Patsy to be properly introduced and to join the festivities, also.

That was why the Frenchmen and Wimpley were loaded in jail with all possible neatness.

The rain and cloudy skies had not cleared up even at night, but eight o'clock found the little household snugly quartered in Nick's own office, where certain material changes were being made in their appearances, changes that would suggest they intended to visit quite fashionable environments in the immediate future. They were talking as they worked.

"When Wimpley bumped into that room, I was never more surprised in my life," Chick exclaimed. "I can't even now place him in the right file."

"I guess it rather knocked me off my pins too, at first," Nick responded, putting the finishing touches to a white tie, "but I suspected that it *might* happen, sooner or later."

"Where does Wimpley stand?"

"In league with the Vignaux element. He is a weak, vaccilating little shrimp of humanity, and the two Frenchmen were lucky to work him as they did. Vignaux number two arrived in town only a month or so ago. We had never collided with his French excellency, but his graft was more elevating than that of his brother. He is a born penman and a shrewd bank swindler. He it was who rented the old vacant store and put up the bank bluff. He was planning to round up a dozen more small banks in a similar fashion, but the Pinkertons began to get wise. He found a very able assistant in Mr. Wimpley, who wanted enough money to support in style a certain lady of our mutual acquaintance. Dishonesty was a short cut to it. I believe that Wimpley knew Vignaux was crooked from almost the second or third day of opera-

tions when checks began to appear against the deposited sum."

"But why should he be cheeky enough to call Hollingsworth up that early morning and warn him of the discovery of the swindle?" Chick inquired.

"To make his position solid. It was only a flash in the pan to other things that our affable, weak-chinned clerk was guilty of. I'll tell you about that later. As far as the office in the wing of the old store is concerned, I believe that Vignaux himself covered that. Sometimes cheek wins out—the police would not be apt to look for the swindlers in the very store that had been rented by them, especially the old deserted wing, and it made a fine secret rendezvous. That map on the wall you saw was dotted with red ink marks—those marks were banks. They had a hot system, as far as I can make it out. So soon as our Hackensack escape made it possible for Vignaux number one to join his brother he did so. The two planned to operate together and were closing out a final long chance. Flori's story seems to clear the remaining sky. I know that the Frenchwoman, Marie Felix, loved Vignaux Number One and that all three were to leave by an early steamer."

"But why didn't you want to run around with Danny to the house mentioned by Flori?"

"That would spoil everything."

"I can't see why. Marie may take it into her head to flee."

"Not just yet. She will attend that ball to-night. We shall see her there—positively. She wants to 'get' Clynton and I mean to capture her before she can do any harm. I want proof of guilt and I am apt to find it to-night."

"There is one thing I can't understand, Nick?"

"What is that?"

"Do you recall that Wimpley stated up in Hollingsworth's office that he saw Vignaux number two—saw him enter that vaudeville house on the side street? Why should he put a detective on the trail of his own pals?"

"He didn't."

"I do not follow you, Nick."

"It's easy. Wimpley did not see Vignaux there at all. He did know, however, that I was at the Hollingsworth mansion and a subtle opportunity to revenge himself upon a rival and an enemy was presented. In short, he wanted me to discover Clynton in that house, knowing that he would be there. He dared not mention Clynton or bring the old man's nephew into the deal, so he worked Vignaux in as a safe and sure lure."

"But it was doing you a mighty good service all the while."

"I should say it was."

It was after nine when Danny brought the machine around. Nick, Chick and Patsy, coated and protected from the dismal rainy night, settled back among the cushions with evident sighs of relief and anticipation. Patsy and Chick knew that their chief had a big scheme on foot for the last hour, but he had not divulged it to them in detail.

As the machine whirled, like a big dragon-fly, through the wet and slippery streets, their curiosity got the better of them.

"Come now, put us wise to this affair to-night, Nick," Chickering said.

Nick Carter smiled in his old way.

"I'll only say this much, boys," he answered, "this will be the most exciting evening you have spent in a long, long while. You are due a bunch of adventure, if that's what you're looking for. I promise you an entertainment that will rival any Broadway show, comedy or tragedy—now you must wait," and the famous detective settled back among the cushions.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAN BEHIND THE SCREEN.

"Peterson's," where the dance was to occur, proved to be a Tenderloin "club" of rather notorious character. Nick Carter, from the first mention of the name at "The Orchid" club, knew about it and its reputation. It was in the Tenderloin district and its proprietor had a certain amount of coöperation from the police, handing out the graft at acceptable intervals. The lower street floor was given over to a café, with modern fixtures, and distinctly better than others of the neighborhood. A broad flight of stairs led to the "club" on the second floor.

Crowds were entering, men and women, as Nick Carter and his eager associates jumped from the wet auto and ran for the stairs. Other taxicabs, carriages and big machines were dumping crowds upon the street, and Nick realized that Clynton was right when he had stated that it would be a "swell affair." Two big electric lights buzzed a glow into the rain and darkness from the broad doorway.

No difficulty in entering was experienced by the three handsome men in full and immaculate evening dress and they passed right up, rather impressed with the thrill and lights and spirit of the occasion.

It was twenty minutes of ten.

"You'll have to be careful, Nick," Chickering whispered, "sure to be some one that knows you in this mob."

"I'm not afraid of that."

"Seen any one you know yet?"

"Not a soul."

They reached the landing and went immediately into the first of three large dance rooms, richly furnished and really handsome in a glittering, showy way.

It was deemed best for the trio to split up here. Patsy went in one direction, Chick in another and Nick Carter remained in the first room temporarily; he was awaiting the arrival of a certain pair and he felt confident that they would appear in a short while.

He was not mistaken. Fifteen minutes after

eleven, when things were just beginning to warm up, Clynton and the vaudeville beauty, Ila, appeared upon the scene. The woman was dressed in the height of fashion and presented a fascinating front as she swept into the main room. Clynton was immaculate in his dress suit. They made a very interesting and handsome couple.

From the very start, Hollingsworth's nephew appeared to be looking for some one. He swept the rooms with a pair of alert eyes and then returned to his partner.

"He is not here," Nick Carter heard the man whisper to his companion. He was standing not two feet from them. The music was in full swing and many couples were already on the floor.

It was at this juncture that the detective did a very wise thing. Off from the main room there was a smaller retiring room, handsomely appointed and filled with palms and flowers. There were quaint corners, lounges and screens.

Nick quietly gained this room.

He seated himself on a lounge near one of the three-sided screens and waited, lighting a cigarette, to keep in harmony with his surroundings, although he detested the weed.

From time to time he looked up.

Two persons were approaching, slowly, as if in deep conversation, heads together and laggard of stride.

Nick Carter thought quickly. Clynton and Ila, the mysterious, were drawing apart from the dancing crowd. They evidently had something to say to each other. The room was absolutely deserted, save for the factors most interested. They thought, not being able to see him, that the room was empty. In a twinkling, the detective sprang across to the screen, and half closed the two hinged sides about him. It was the one chance he must take.

A second later, man and woman were dead ahead. Both appeared excited; both were talking in a subdued tone, but he could hear every word.

"Did you see him come in?" Ila asked.

"Yes."

"Was he alone?"

"I think so. There is no reason for him to bring any one along. We must make quick work of it."

"Are you sure that you can handle it?"

"Trust me—please."

With that, Ila loosened the folds of a soft shawl. She drew forth a small box, ornamented and shiny. The lid snapped back and a peculiar glint flashed upward that could not be mistaken. The case contained jewels. The woman thrust it hurriedly forward, as a step sounded from the distance. Clynton stepped forward, eyes beaming, hands grasping, the fear of detection in his heart. The detective, half hidden by the screen, realized that he might be discovered if he did not work quickly.

"Take them?" Ila murmured.

"Who was that?" Hollingsworth's nephew inquired in a rasping voice.

Just at this crucial moment, Nick Carter drew the two sides of the screen softly about him, safe for the second but doubtful of what was to follow. He knew two or three things; one was that some one was due at the ball that night who would purchase the famous string of diamonds at a fabulous price from Clynton. This personage had been tentatively mentioned as "the diamond king." In all probability, it was an underhanded merchant, willing to buy stolen goods under any and all circumstances if he could strike a rich bargain. The detective knew also that Clynton had struck up with the woman Ila, that he was smitten with her, that he had taken her into his confidence and that he had turned over the stolen jewels to her immediately after taking them from the Hollingsworth mansion. Now they were being returned for the grand bargain. Clynton was too smart to have them anywhere around him. He might be suspected at any moment. A shrewd woman can conceal things with amazing dexterity.

Clynton seized the casket, thrust its contents into his inner coat pocket, and then deliberately threw the case over the top of the screen occupied by Nick Carter.

At the very same second Ila swept around that screen and hurriedly quitted the room. She wanted to leave her companion with whoever chanced to enter.

Carter took a second glance through the crack of the closed screen.

He was just in time to witness a tragedy, the like of which he had never seen before, during a period of years and years of criminal work.

A short, quick cry, a gasp, a gurgling in the throat from a man, and that man Clynton; the gleam of a knife in the brilliant light and the hurried fluttering of skirts.

Marie Felix was the interloper, Nick Carter knew that. She had drawn a knife, like the tigress she was, and had plunged it full into the heart of the young man beyond the screen.

It was time for immediate action.

The two wings of the screen flew apart and Nick Carter leaped over the body of the dying Clynton.

He stopped, by force of circumstances, for Clynton was speaking, even at his hour of death, and every word meant the confession of his month of crime. As the detective placed the quivering head down, from knees to rugs, he experienced a sensation that was not altogether pleasant. The face looking up into his was a face upon which crime had made its markings; a handsome face, yes, but the lips leered and the eyes still held the glittering, daring glance of daredevil challenge.

Marie Felix, on the other hand, was not destined to escape from the room. She had dropped the knife midway to the door, when Chick, as if by intuition, met her, with the plush curtains falling behind him as he softly entered. He held her captive, as Nick Carter joined him, although Madam Felix fought, scratched and threatened.

The matter was handled as quietly as was possible, under the circumstances. The body of Clynton was covered with a portière, snatched from its rings, and the room door that connected with the dance floor was locked. Patsy and Chick held guard, while Nick Carter summoned police assistance. He did not wish to excite the assembly if he could avoid it.

He did in five excited minutes locate the diamond king, who proved to be no less a personage than our old friend, Isaac Maryinetta, a dealer in valuable jewels, and a man who did not ask too many questions. Clynton had simply approached him on the subject of a certain deal, and the man, knowing what jewels were worth, ventured the purchase at a rate that interested him. The consummation of that deal was destined and scheduled to come off on the night of the ball, especially as Maryinetta knew Ila, and her influence over him amounted to something.

As soon as the district attorney's men were in charge, Nick Carter and his associates stormed the rainy night in the machine and reached Hollingsworth's mansion before the old gentleman had thought of retiring.

They trooped up to his private office, wet and mud-spattered, but it made no difference, for their mission was one of good cheer.

In a few brief words, the detective handed over the missing string of diamonds, taken from Clynton's dead body. Mr. Hollingsworth was amazed and dumfounded.

"Where did you get them?" he gasped.

"I have come to tell you that, sir," Nick Carter responded.

"But I can scarcely credit it."

"Chance, three-fourths chance," Nick went on. "Quiet yourself, Mr. Hollingsworth. The puzzle has been solved, difficult as it was. You made one mistake only, sir; that was in not telling me of your nephew."

"I—I—fail to grasp your——"

"My meaning. Let me make it clear to you. It was your precious nephew who entered the house that night. He had no difficulty in entering, because he was in league with no less a celebrity than Mr. Hicks, our confidential and ever-reliable butler, the man with so many recommendations. They worked together on this deal. The nephew, sir, knew of the diamonds. He admitted to me that he followed you to the ship and was aware of the jewel case and its contents. You had not been in the house ten minutes before he followed you, Hicks helping him. He hid in that large empty closet to the right of the bay-window door. He remained there for many hours until his opportunity came. It did not come, however, until you locked the big door and went to the telephone. Softly opening the door, he looked through the keyhole—that keyhole, as I noted on my first visit is exceptionally large. The key is an immense one. Now please recall the exact position of the safe. It stands a short distance from the bay-window door. If one looks through the keyhole, one may see the top level of the little safe. You left the uncovered jewels on top when you hurried to the phone."

Now Carter drew the little coil of wire from his pocket that had been discovered in Clynton's room. He unrolled it and spread it out in a long, slender, but firm metal line.

"Making a small hook at the end of this wire, Clynton shoved the wire through the large keyhole. He caught it in the diamond necklace at the first jewel and dragged it slowly but surely through the opening in the door. If you will make an examination of this keyhole, you will appreciate the possibility of such an act. The hole is large. No one of the diamonds is large. You know their carat. It required care and dexterity, but he simply slid the string of gems through the opening. In doing so, some of the other gems were scattered upon the floor, as they rolled from the top of the safe. This led you to believe that some one had actually been in the room, whereas the door was never unlocked at all. Your nephew remained in the closet, unsuspected, until you left for my office, when, with the assistance of the butler, he made a safe getaway; but—and here is where the case increases in its ghastly import—there is the mystery of the murder

of little Constantina Felix. I wish to enlighten you on that score."

Hollingsworth was not the only one intent on this part of the story. Patsy and Chick were equally interested.

"Constantina Felix has led a better life since we knew her last. Who knows but what love, and the death of the one she did love, may have much to do with it. The girl remembered the old days. She knew of the murder of Hollingsworth's daughter—your daughter, sir. She never sympathized with it and it weighted her waking and dreaming hours. Through association with her mother, she heard of the Vignaux plans to harm the bank. It was her intention, gentlemen, to warn Mr. Hollingsworth, and she came that fatal morning to tell him of the danger—of the intrigue. She did it, voluntarily and on her own responsibility. I have had talks with Constantina and I know that she was not irretrievably bad. Unfortunately, she had met Clynton. It was at the same vaudeville agency visited by myself, and where I first saw your nephew, Mr. Hollingsworth. Constantina, in Paris, was quite a singer. She had a sweet, clear voice and had been on the vaudeville stage, both abroad and in this country. She was negotiating with the agency when she happened to meet Clynton, who went there to meet Ila, with whom he was enamored. They knew each other. The girl feared him—she had even crossed him.

"Clynton was about to leave the house with his stolen goods, when he met the girl face to face in the lower hall. The same old antagonism was present. Clynton became suspicious. He believed that Constantina had spied upon him and was intent upon telling Mr. Hollingsworth. When she made resistance, he dragged her into the empty dining room, struck her across the temples and back of the head with the water bottle and killed her. After placing the body beneath the table and shielding it with the tablecloth, he hurried from the house."

"What of Wimpley?" Chick interrupted. "He——"

Nick Carter anticipated the question.

"Wimpley has been an old vaudeville man. He once was advance agent for a burlesque show, before he settled down to the more conservative business of bank clerk. He met the woman Ila. He really loved her and was extremely jealous of young Clynton. He saw his prize slipping from his fingers and resolved to get even with Clynton. That was why he was so anxious for me to discover him at the agency, and in all of the clerk's clever and subtle conversations with me, he led me to believe that Clynton was not straight, which he doubtless knew, anyway. Nothing would have pleased Wimpley more than to see Clynton behind the bars. We have Ila now, under arrest, along with the others, and she will verify these facts, if they need it. In the meanwhile, Mr. Hollingsworth, I wanted to come around to-night to return the stolen necklace and to assure you that much of the stolen funds from your bank can be recovered. Vignaux and his brother were heavy with coin when taken into custody. As for your nephew, I will not discuss that matter. It is beyond my province. I know some things concerning him, others I do not."

Hollingsworth was willing to talk, however.

"Mr. Carter," he declared, "I will admit that I should have mentioned my nephew, but the fact is, I never suspected him in the least. I gave a solemn promise that I would do all that I could for that boy—to his mother. I was trying to protect him against himself. I did not care to bring him into the matter, for I knew how wayward he was and how prone you might be to snatch at a point like that. Poor Clynton, there were some good points about him, and many bad ones. His death doubtless is a blessing."

To which there were certain silent "amens."

"I feel," concluded Nick Carter, "that the case has been a matter of happy coincidence more than clever deduction. Events have played into our hands. I am pleased because of one great fact. We have rounded up a circle of criminals. I always knew that Marie Felix, for instance, was in with Vignaux. Her love was stronger than her desire to live a straight life. She was willing to do anything for his sake. We have her. Vignaux and his brother are safely landed in a bondage from which they will never break. Clynton is dead. Wimpley will receive his just deserts. The woman Ila will not go free because of her part of the affair, and the net result is especially satisfactory to me. We wipe the slate clean. To-morrow we shall look up Flori's story and see what that very bad father of hers is doing and try to set him right. Every thread has been gathered, every snarl untwisted, and principally because Patsy and Chick turned toughs for the time being. I do not desire any special credit."

"You want to look out for Danny," Chick put in, smiling. "He insists that Flori intends to marry him immediately, and they want to spend their honeymoon in an automobile."

THE END.

The next number (651) will contain "The Affair of the Missing Bonds; or, Nick Carter in Harness."

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NEW YORK, June 12, 1909.

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MODERN MYSTERIES OF PARIS.

Paris is often called the "City of Light." It may quite as truly be called the "City of Obscure Crimes."

Every large city has its hooligans, but nowhere are they so numerous, and, above all, so daring, so well organized, as in Paris. They call themselves "Apaches," and have, indeed, the cruelty, the audacity, and bloodthirstiness of the famous tribe of Indians, of whose fearful exploits every child has read.

The Paris newspapers contain daily records of the Apaches' crimes. It is most dangerous to walk at night in at least one dozen large districts of the French capital. The worst are La Vilette, La Maison-Blanche, Point du Jour, and the Porte de Vincennes. As for the Bois de Boulogne, the famous and immense park at the doors of Paris, it is simply swarming with these ruffians.

The Apache is generally a youth from fifteen to twenty-two, ever ready to take part in a battle, if he can do so without risking his own life. He will attack and rob inoffensive people at night, and even knife them for pleasure. He calls it art for art's sake. In spite of raids made almost every night by the police, the Apaches do not disappear; they only change their haunts.

During the summer months they come down from the centre of Paris into the main boulevards after midnight, under pretext of looking for work in the central markets.

Apache is almost a title. The young man must be known for his courage, his fiendishness, and his ability in playing with the knife to be recognized as an Apache among his peers.

His gymnastic abilities, and the fact that he is most of the time warned by his comrades, generally help him to escape the police. As soon as he has become unusually heroic or revengeful, and recognizes this, the Apache adopts a name, and his life henceforth is spent in trying to make that name more and more dreadful. The "Terror of Pantin," the "Panther of Montparnasse" have almost become classical names.

The most dangerous place in Europe after dark is perhaps the Bois de Boulogne—a veritable forest, covering eighteen hundred acres. Carriages are stopped, and their occupants robbed; wires are stretched across the cycling track; and pedestrains are constantly being attacked, and compelled to give up their purses, under threat of a revolver, or the famous Apache knife.

It is reckoned that there are sixty thousand criminals in Paris. To cope with these there are only eight thousand "sergents-de-ville"—or policemen—and three hundred detectives.

Besides the Apaches, there are various classes of criminals.

The "Barbillon" is a lad who has run away from home, and helps burglars. When he reaches the age of fifteen he becomes dangerous. Anxious to make a reputation for himself, he makes a bet, drinks to give himself courage, and uses a knife. If he wounds dangerously a passer-by at night, he is admitted into the gang, and dubbed a "costeau," who has drawn his first blood.

The "Monte-en-l'air" is less of a coward, and generally older than the average Apache. He is the professional burglar. His "work" requires special qualities of initiative, energy, strength, nimbleness, and pluck. The "Monte-en-l'air" never works alone, but associates with two or three of his fellows.

The "Roulottier's" specialty is robbing parcels at railway stations, in trains, or from carriages.

The number of these hooligans has undoubtedly increased since the end of 1906, for at that time the abolition of capital punishment was practically decided. There has been during the last two years an average of five murders a month in or around Paris. No day passes without at least a dozen attacks on passers-by. Burglaries are more rare in Paris than in London, but blood is drawn far more frequently.

The Apache, when caught, runs little risk, unless he has a previous conviction. He can generally produce a certificate of employment, showing that he is earning his living somewhere or other, and the police, after arresting him for loitering, have to stand by and watch the magistrate discharge him again.

Prior to 1898 the Apaches were known as "Vauriens," or "No Goods." In that year, however, a French newspaper reporter walked into the Belleville police station to hear what had happened during the last twenty-four hours, and learned that on the previous night, in the Faubourg du Temple, a man had been discovered by the police gagged and bound, with a woman's hat pin pierced clean through his face, and the neck had been outrageously tattooed.

The novelty of such a crime struck the reporter, who, having read the Indian stories of Mayne Reid and Gustave Aimard, exclaimed: "This must be the work of Apaches!"

"That is a good name," replied the police official.

Next morning the reporter's account of the crime was published, with the heading, "Crime Committed by the Apaches of Belleville." It was the first time the word had been used in connection with the hooligan class, and it became at once popular.

Soon the word was on every lip. The "Vauriens"—flattered, unfortunately, at receiving so much attention—began to live up to the reputation of the new name which had been given them.

In December, 1898, a café on the Place du Palais Royal was broken into and robbed, and on one of the mirrors the thieves had traced, with a piece of soap, the words, "This was done by the Apaches." During the whole of that winter outrages abounded.

The most abominable point about the crimes which are daily taking place in the French capital and its suburbs is that on almost every occasion they are committed without any apparent motive. Parisian hooligans have been known to play at cards, after having agreed that the loser would shoot the first man he should meet on leaving the room. The loser, considering his "honor" as engaged, never hesitates to fulfill his "duty," and to pistol some one brutally in the back.

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